



CHRISTIAN ECKART

CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Interview by Harryet Candee Photographs Courtesy of Artist

Over the past few months I have had the privilege of getting acquainted with the artist Christian Eckart through multiple phone conversations from his home/studio in Houston, Texas, and my studio, in Monterey, Massachusetts. Our interview in this issue is the culmination of a joint effort in order to shed some light on Christian's practice regarding his exploration of art and its utility in relation to history, culture, society, spiritualism, philosophy and aesthetics.

Harryet Candee: *Going back to this past July, you had a site-specific installation on the 2nd floor at The Re Institute located in Millerton NY, called, Closer/Still II. What did this opportunity offer you the chance to do? Did you enjoy the whole experience at Re?*

Christian Eckart: I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to produce a site-specific installation artwork, Closer/Still II, for the Re Institute in Millerton, NY and especially during a period that included Upstate Art Weekend. My very good friend and a very good artist, Brenda Zlamany, introduced me and my work to Henry Klimowicz, the owner/operator/gallerist of the venue. When I saw pictures of the exhibition space, I immediately began thinking about what kind of installation could and would make the best use of the space. I had recently generated a number of interesting post-abstract images based upon the crea-

tion of a virtual (3D digital model) stained glass sculpture. It occurred to me that I could create a site-specific installation that referred back to an artwork I'd made in art school in 1982/3, Closer/Still, in homage to Ian Curtis, the lead singer of the band Joy Division, as well as recalling the profound impact of my experience of the stained glass of Sainte-Chappelle in Paris. It also provided me with an opportunity to test a hypothesis regarding what I would refer to as the psychoactive and psychotropic potential of color.

The shape of Henry's barn is suggestive of Gothic arches and so I decided to try to convert the barn into a church-like sanctuary. Much of my work has attempted to indicate and disclose that "serious" contemporary artistic production relies, implicitly or explicitly, upon a tradition of the manufacturing of religious artifacts with the intention of enunciating an overarching narrative for

the purpose of managing and unifying Western society. For me it's possible, then, to think that perhaps a space such as a barn, where sustenance has been stored and processed for millennia, may have been the model for and had evolved into the spaces we identify as houses of worship. Keep in mind that Christ is said to have been born in a manger. The show at the Re Institute provided the circumstances to try to connect all of these disparate dots and to see what would happen.

I had a wonderful time preparing and installing the exhibition, connecting with old friends and making new ones and I thank Henry for giving me the chance to present the works and for his extraordinary hospitality and efforts on behalf of me and my work.

You were an emerging artist in the 80s in NYC. It was considered to be an important groundbreak-



Christian Eckart, Installation view of *Closer/Still II*, 2022. The Re Institute, Millerton New York.
Dye-sublimated digital prints on fabric. Eight elements each 175" x 45". Overall dimensions approximately 180" x 192" x 288".

ing time for advanced ideas in geometric, conceptual painting and sculpture. How did you process this kind of art emerging around you? What did you see at this exciting time?

CE: I have so much to say on this topic I'm considering writing a book one day. For me the 80's in the NY artworld was an unbelievably extraordinary time. Allow me to go backwards and set the scene a bit. I was doing my undergraduate work at the Alberta College of Art in Calgary in Western Canada and had arrived at a point where it was apparent to me that there would most likely be a fairly limited reception for the ideas that I was dealing with. However, because I was obsessed with learning all that I could about art and art history, I found myself spending an inordinate amount of time in the school's quite comprehensive library. I was also an avid reader of art periodicals such as *Art In America*, *Artforum*, *FlashArt* and *Arts Magazine*, etc. While perusing those magazines it became apparent to me that there seemed to be a discourse emerging in the New York art scene that might support and corroborate the ideas I was pursuing with my work, especially as per a couple of articles written by Peter Halley for *Arts Magazine* and possibly others during the early 80's. Those articles made it clear that there could be some kind of context for what I thought I was trying to do and so I decided that I should try to do my post-graduate studies in NY so as to enhance the chances that my work could participate in what I'd identified

as an emergent dialog. I applied to, and was accepted into, the MFA program at Hunter College and had the great fortune of having Robert Morris, the main reason I chose Hunter along with Carter Ratcliff, Marcia Hafif and Alice Aycock, as my thesis advisor. Apparently I was correct in believing that the New York artworld of the mid-80's could be hospitable to my work, concerns and motivations and I emerged with back to back solo exhibitions at Massimo Audiello Gallery in the East Village in the spring and then the fall of 1986, the first of which occurred prior to my thesis show at Hunter.

Can you give us a picture of what your life was like back then? What was your day and night life like while learning to be an artist in the city?

CE: This is a fun and funny question to consider. When I moved to New York for school I was prepared to do anything to make it work. I assumed that I might end up living and working somewhere without heat and/or running water and was prepared to collect rainwater if necessary. My first home and studio was a ground floor loft on the south side of Williamsburg, Bedford Avenue and South 9th Street, a former A & P grocery store where apparently a cashier had once been shot and killed. Today Williamsburg is one of the trendiest and most exciting neighborhoods in the city but back then it was scary as hell, especially the south side. I believe that it's where the movie "Serpico" was filmed because the area was the most visually

frightening location in the city. And, although I was able to work off the books for my landlord, I had virtually no money. My girlfriend and I collected soda bottles for refunds and lived on popcorn we purchased with the proceeds. We became very good at preparing popcorn with various things such as soy sauce, nutritional yeast, cayenne pepper, Italian seasoning, garlic powder, parmesan cheese and so on. Our landlord had installed a window high up on the back wall through which the aroma of burning cars and the sounds of gunshots invaded every night. It's the only place I've ever seen a police car up on blocks, stripped and burned and that happened a couple of times. Back then in that part of Williamsburg most of the buildings were vacant, if not completely demolished, and there were packs of wild scavenging dogs, ten to twenty at a time. However, as with all things in New York, change came rapidly and before I knew it Williamsburg started to become the hippest neighborhood in NY and maybe the entire country.

The East Village artworld of the period was amazing and felt like the center of the universe until some of the more important galleries and artists were co-opted by the major galleries in Soho. I learned that in New York talent wasn't an exception but rather the rule. There were so many enormously talented people everywhere, all the time; filmmakers, dancers, musicians, bands, artists, actors, stage and theater people, creatives of literally
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Christian Eckart, *Andachtsbild #720*, 1990.
23 carat gold-leaf on acrylic gel medium on birch plywood panel and pine and poplar moulding. 96.5" x 63.5" overall.

every variety. It was an amazing time and place to be and I have deep and abiding nostalgia for it all.

When was it that you were first formulating specific opinions and theories of your own and applying them to your art making? Did they only get stronger when you found other artists working with similar viewpoints?

CE: I truly believe that although artists have ideas about why they do what they do it's impossible, and probably better, to not have absolute clarity about it. My understanding is that the processing power of the subconscious is approximately a million times greater than that of consciousness. Because art-making/working is so dependent upon intuition, exposure to and knowledge of specific tools, processes and native skills, prejudices and biases and so on that there are simply far too many variables to take into account for a complete and total understanding of what one might be doing and why. What I can say is that an artist can claim to understand his or her motivations and imperatives, if not their actual goals. However, an artist can rarely claim that those motivations, imperatives and goals actually inhere in the resultant works. Having said all that, I think the most honest response is that such knowledge is an ever-evolving work in progress. There are some fundamental concerns that have driven my production since I was a child. And then there are slowly emerging epiphanies that come with time and labor.

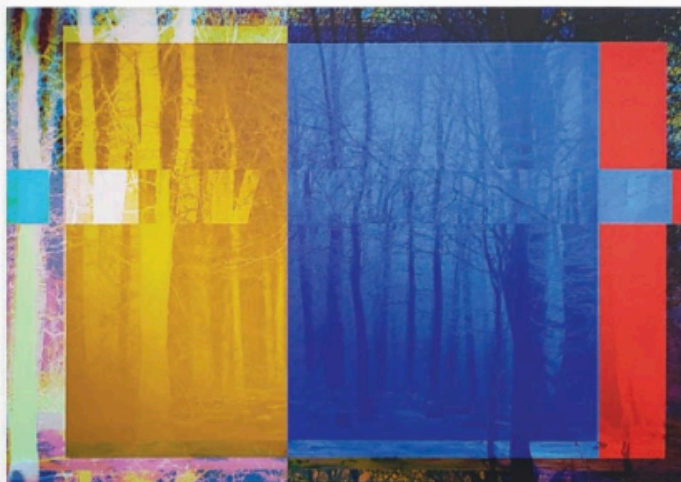
To be honest I feel very lucky insofar as I believe I was chosen by a subject relatively early on. A few very basic questions such as "what is art" and

"what is a painting" led, ultimately, to a kind of possession wherein eventually I was forced to initiate a kind of philosophical/conceptual practice expressed via the form of hybrid painting/sculpture meta-painting objects predicated on a very personal relationship to the history of Western painting since before the Renaissance. Through the years, and with the benefit of hindsight and a more developed intellect, things have become clearer. But with more clarity come bigger, harder more complicated questions. The age-old axiom, "The more you know, the less you know" couldn't be more true.

As things became less nebulous it also became apparent, despite what I said earlier about having identified a discourse and context in the New York artworld of the mid-80's that seemed to apply to what I thought I was doing, that I was well and truly working in terrain that was almost uniquely my own. Recently I've been thinking that it's in a kind of twilight zone somewhere between and around Joseph Kosuth, James Lee Byars and Donald Judd if that makes any sense. At this point I think of myself as working for an audience of one, me, with the hope, of course, that others might find what I do interesting, meaningful and/or somehow satisfying. When I was doing my undergraduate art education, I was told that painting was dead and my response was, "Cool, what killed it? Let's do an autopsy." And as a result, I've been working from a post-painting mindset all along while most of my friends and colleagues are, and were, smart enough to know that painting could never be dead.

The show you were in, Color and Form at LACMA, in 2011, was where you showed with Imi Knoebel, John McCracken, Gunther Forg and Peter Halley. Why was this exhibition important considering that much of the art originally surfaced in the 1980s, or before, and was now being shown in 2011?

CE: Oh wow! I can't believe you've brought up that exhibition. I actually feel, about that show, is that it's the greatest missed opportunity of my entire art career. Maybe second greatest insofar as a lot went sideways with an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam called "Horn Of Plenty" in 1989 but that's a story for another day. My understanding is that it was organized to supplement and buttress an exhibition of Blinky Palermo works also at LACMA at the same time. Back then I felt that enough time had passed and enough critical writing of a certain sort had been deployed, as well as that the exhibition of Blinky Palermo's works provided an ideal context and jumping off point, for the possibility of initiating a deeper reconsideration of a certain type of post-painterly, post-minimal abstract production. And the artists who had been chosen by the curator were literally an A-Team, albeit extremely finite, for doing just that. Unfortunately, institutions being what they are, most of the heavy lifting was left up to the audience without provision or guidance about how to understand, read and use such gestures, why they'd been generated and what they might imply. As far as I'm concerned, if ever there was a show that could have used some robust didactic panels and a great accompanying catalog essay that was the one. Of course, I'm very



Christian Eckart, *Forest 1*, 2021.
 Unique archival aqueous ink digital print on
 Belgian Linen, 55" x 78.5".

proud to have been included although I couldn't possibly convey how costly the fallout has actually been for me as a result of my inclusion. Think I'll leave it at that.

Were these artists also friends with whom you would hang, go gallery hopping, parties? Some good ones, I hope! Any stories you can share.

CE: Unfortunately, that's a "no"; Peter Halley is the only one of the group I've ever met although I can say that I've met just about everyone that there was to meet during that wild period of the mid to late 80's and then the 90's. However, I'm a huge fan of Imi Knoebel and John McCracken and my work has been included in numerous exhibitions and is in museum collections in which their works are featured as well. In relation to those names I was a bit of an interloper insofar as I'm somewhat younger than all of them and feel, ultimately, that I'm working in a way that has me now and again stepping into terrain that they were cultivating. Do I have stories about that time? You bet I do. I will say, though, that I once saw Keith Haring at a party standing in the middle of a room full of superstar artists – Julian Schnabel, George Condo, Francesco Clemente, etc. - and he was absolutely glowing from within and it seemed as though his aura, or whatever you might want to call it, was actually pressing everyone else against the walls.

What are you presently working on? How is it linked to previous work?

CE: Well, as usual I'm working on many things at the same time. I've recently completed some private commissions and have recently held a couple

of large group studio visits - one with about a hundred people and the other, a museum group from Laguna Beach CA, of around thirty. I continue to develop and produce the hybrid painting/sculpture constructed works I've been known for. However, my primary focus over the past few years has been digitally constructed works printed on Belgian Linen or canvas and generally related to the painting and photography of the enlightenment sublime. Although works from these two bodies appear very different superficially, the similarities are most intriguing to me. I've been involved with digital technologies, like many contemporary artists, for the past thirty years with the first totally digital pieces being made well over ten years ago. The more recent digital works are again driven by a powerful desire to engage with the history of painting and they're also constructed works in their own right although they're constructed digitally rather than mechanically. The exhibition at the Re Institute in Millerton, NY, was a spin-off from the digital works that have been my principle focus over the past few years.

However, the digital works are quite different insofar as they're motivated, to some extent, by concerns regarding the climate crisis. With the more recent digital pieces I've also been seeking to generate a type of imagery and manner of working that more directly corresponds to these new amazing image-making technologies. I've been seeking to identify an interstitial form that operates in a space that's not necessarily painting, photography, sculpture or film but, rather, its own thing. I suppose that I should admit to subscribing to a kind of McLuhanism in relation to his pronouncement

that "the medium is the message" which seems to apply here.

Tell us about the geometric series, Andachtsbild paintings?

CE: *Andachtsbild* denotatively means devotional image. My understanding is that an emerging merchant class (a totally new donor constituency beyond those of the church and state) would commission artworks depicting biblical stories that might have particular personal relevance and/or resonance. Apparently, such works were installed in private devotional spaces within the family homes of such newly minted wealthy families. For me, then, the term itself, *Andachtsbild*, refers to a certain kind of phenomenology of the use of artworks that indexes their utility as status symbols and mechanisms of transcendent aspiration at a critical time in history; the birth of the enlightenment, the beginning of capitalism, colonialism and the emergence of what people eventually called the "bourgeoisie." It was my interest to create works that were a disclosure/critique of the above-mentioned dynamics and it was my hope that such works would infiltrate institutions such as museums, banks, investment house, etc. I thought of those works as quite subversive although I'm fairly confident that that's not at all how they were received. The Reagan era distorted the reception of much of the critical production of the mid to late 80's art insofar as works of that period were seen as being complicit in, and with, a kind of frenzied consumerism rather than as a critique of such and the needs, wants and desires
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Christian Eckart, *The Absurd Vehicle*, 2011.
Extreme-effect acrylic urethane on aluminum, powder-coated steel, stainless steel, automotive suspension systems, rubber tires and custom-made race-car rims.
Approximately 140" tall x 144" circumference.

of American society at the time. I'm always hoping for a sophisticated re-evaluation of the work from that period from a perspective somewhat ing for a sophisticated re-evaluation of the work from that period from a perspective somewhat like what I've just elaborated.

Rothko's idea is that you should not have any explanations of art in order to get it. What do you think of this? How is it that artwork so simple, can be so compelling and profound in your opinion?

CE: Well, I for sure don't have any idea of Rothko's goals and imperatives although I do feel that I have a fairly deep sense of his achievement. What I can attest to is that I'm, as I believe Rothko would have been, not particularly interested in meaning, narrative and/or "aboutism" as it relates to works of art. It's my belief that art's greatest strength is in its apparent lack of usefulness, utility. I understand the use of almost every class of objects in the world; bicycles, corkscrews, towels, etc. In fact, most man-made objects have very clear and specified utility. Artworks, on the other hand, generally don't unless they're editorializing a position in which case, they're simply editorials. What this implies to me is that artworks succeed or fail based upon intangible utility and it's those intangible uses that have been at the center of my exploration from day one. So, I would guess that Rothko's primary concerns would have been around the poetic and unspecified ineffable implications and impact of the works he produced.

As I've alluded to previously, I've been attempting

to develop and deploy a kind of meta-sublime whereby I've been obliged to identify and formalize specific properties of the Sublime as they pertain to painting and that's led me to notions regarding the re-acquisition of the space of the womb. I believe this applies quite directly and clearly to Rothko and the kind of light he ended up depicting.

Is there a work of art you have created that signifies great importance for you on your journey becoming an art maker? Tell us about this art, please.

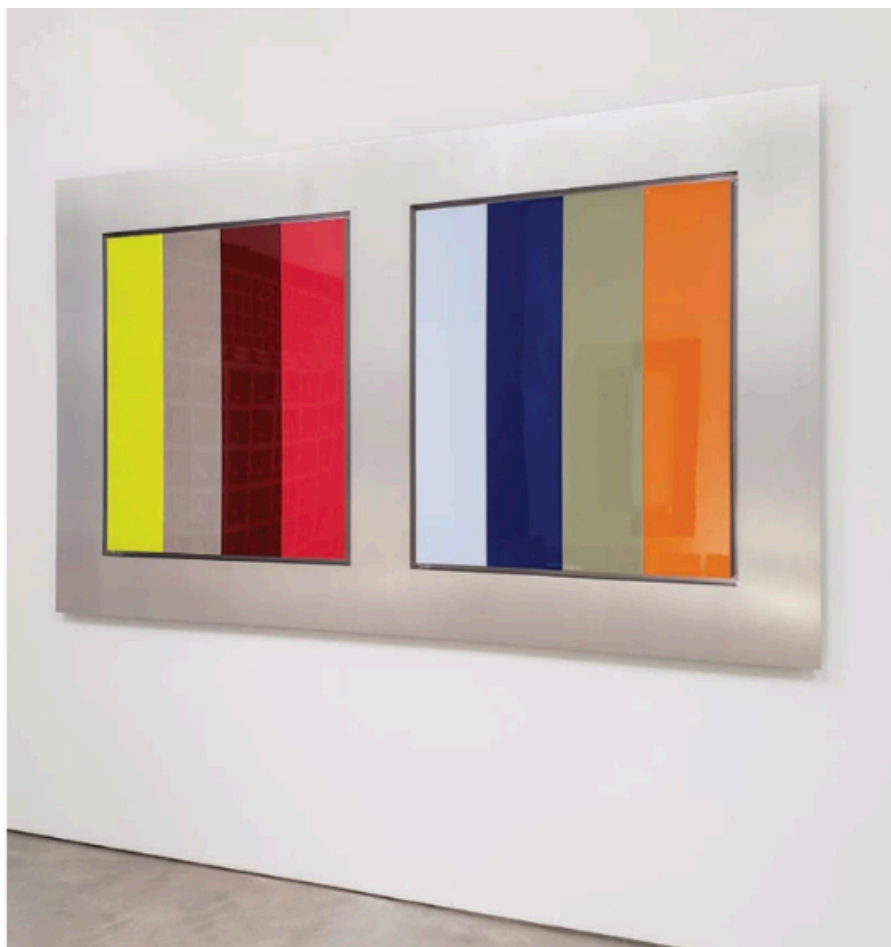
CE: This is an interesting question to consider. I have strong feelings about certain works, certain series (such as the *Andachtsbild* series mentioned previously) and all of my large-scale commissions for various reasons. Furthermore, I'm very proud of most of the works that have left my studio over the years. However, if there's one artwork that stands out for me it's a work entitled "The Absurd Vehicle" from 2011. I think of that piece as a kind of summary of my thoughts, feelings and concerns as they apply to the work of the first 25 to 30 years of my career. I like to describe the piece as a painting that wanted to be a sculpture which then chose to be a race car, which morphed into a fighter jet and then subsequently a space vehicle, and finally manifesting as an oracle. For me it's a grand monolithic gesture that's a synopsis of the magical thinking and absurdity that accompanies the use of artworks as sites or mechanisms of status, communal self-aggrandizement and tran-

scendental aspirationalism. For me there is no question that artworks can be valuable tools for self-actualization, spiritual and personal development but that such functions are of little to no relevance in the context of hyper-capitalism and the imperatives of the instant gratification soundbite culture of social media and the 24-hour news cycle. In an overwhelming informational landscape, I like to think of artworks as alternative information - something other - and I'm disturbed by works that seem to be part of the problem rather than functioning as some kind of antidote or otherness.

Do you refer back to earlier works of art that you made in order to strengthen the work you are presently making? In what ways? And, how?

CE: With my work I am constantly referencing earlier works within a framework of my critical, theoretical and philosophical concerns. Excellent examples of this would be the *Double Sacra Conversazione* Painting, the *Sacra Conversazione* Painting - *Versione Follia* as well as the *Polychrome* Painting series. I started out operating this way because I assumed that there might be some kind of continuity to the audience. My working assumption back at the beginning of my exhibition history was that shows were for the presentation of findings from the private laboratories of various practitioners and that then those findings would be presented, considered, reviewed and disseminated by a community of peers and so forth. Pretty fucking naive is all I can say now.

Christian Eckart,
 Double Sacra Conversazione Painting, 2019.
 Private commission.
 Acrylic urethane on aluminum.
 60" x 100" x 3".



You have lectured and published a number of essays and articles on art. You also taught at my former college, SVA! With that in mind, I am curious to know more about the Sacra Conversazione Painting series. Can you offer us a deeper understanding of this work of art based on your quote: "My belief is that art is a verb, not a noun, and that, if art exists at all as an objective reality, it is the byproduct of an interaction/negotiation occurring between a percipient and any object or act that invites or demands deep engagement."

CE: That quote represents what I think about in art in general. Here's what I can say about the quote in relation to the Sacra Conversazione Paintings and how I ended up making them. An exhibition opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1987 entitled "The Age of Correggio and The Carracci: Emilian Painting of the 16th and 17th Centuries." It was an exceptional exhibition and absolutely perfect timing for me in relation to where I was headed as an artist having just emerged with two solo exhibitions the year before and with a number of shows upcoming in Western Europe. I went several times during the period it was up. Amongst many profound takeaways for me was the experience of a modest (relatively speaking) painting by Correggio entitled Sacra Conversazione. I found the painting working on me in a way that I didn't understand. It was a relatively small and simple painting; 4 or 5 figures standing in silence - in theory 4 or 5 saints and/or martyrs in Holy Communion. No drama, no action, just 4 or 5 people doing nothing but standing

around. And yet it was subtly disarming; but how so? As I thought about why it had impacted me as it had it occurred to me that it was doing so as a result of the abstract formal properties of the painting; ultimately the colors and arrangement of the garments the figures were wearing. Now the way I tend to work is that if I experience something like this I'll often wonder how, hypothetically, might I create something that re-presents the circumstances for the experience I had with the painting and what might the minimum means be for producing a mechanism (in this case a constructed meta-painting) that could potentially provoke similar responses from other viewer's? The Sacra Conversazione Painting series is a result of that process and methodology.

As far as your long list of commissioned art goes, how did you come up with the concept for the installation: Cloud Room Field?

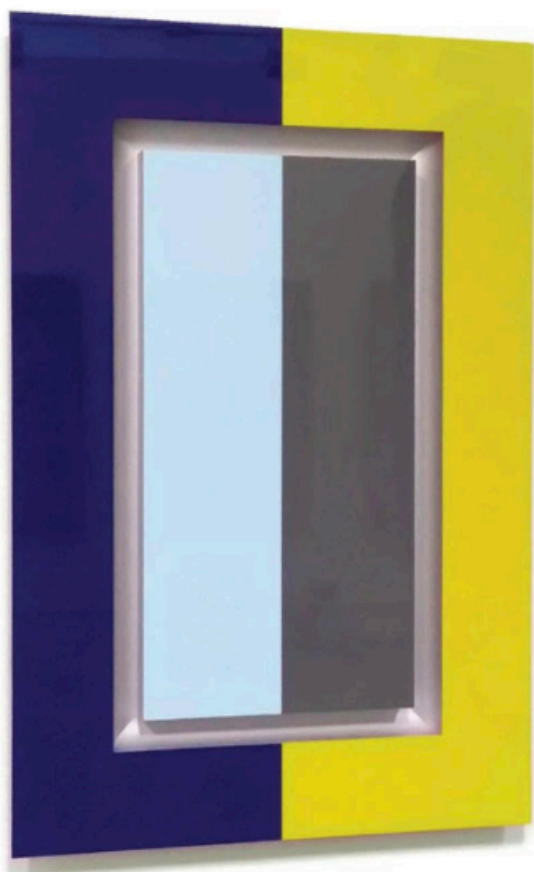
CE: As I've mentioned before, almost everything I do is in relation to how I think about painting and the unique use of art history I've developed based upon personal interests, questions, concerns and needs. Cloudroom Field developed as a response to an awesome opportunity and spectacular site I was presented with for a piece for Hobby Airport in Houston. By the time I was selected to make a work for the site I'd already been producing works for many years with materials that are interactive in some way. This is going to sound a bit pedantic but a painting (or any work of art) requires a percipient to engage with it in order for

it to become activated. I had been making works with extreme-effect paint as well as dichroic glass in order to hyper-actualize the interactive aspect of my pieces and artworks in general. So, for instance, the materials for a piece might change color, shape and/or configuration slightly as a viewer moves around the work. The site at Hobby Airport offered sightlines from 180 degrees and so I proposed a work that would be different from every angle and based upon the model of color-field painting of the 60's onward.

Polychrome Painting is captivating for me and wonder why you have chosen those particular colors to use.

CE: My relationship to color comes, again, as a result of being a consummate student of painting. Initially I was influenced by the color palettes of early Renaissance frescoes and then later by the palettes of the late Renaissance and Baroque periods. I've attempted to identify, emulate and then hyperbolize established palettes from those periods treating them as ready-mades in their own right. Of course, over the years as my relationship to color evolved and my skills as a colorist developed, I've become much more conversant and adventurous with color. However, I've pretty much always treated color and color palettes as ready-mades which is why the first works I made employing color utilized plexiglass, Formica and then automotive paints. I've always attempted to use the prosaic banal materials of industrial pro-

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Christian Eckart, *Polychrome Painting*, 2015.
Acrylic urethane on aluminum. 69" x 45" x 3".



duction as one of the ways in which to demystify the objects themselves.

How was this physically constructed, by the way? Can you take us into your studio workspace and give us a picture of how you do the physical construction? What was the most difficult piece to assemble and feel masterful of?

CE: I've used fabricators to produce most of my works. This began as a simple studio-based decision. Did I wish to pursue a labor-intensive practice or a capital-intensive practice? Ultimately, I decided that time was more valuable than money (which may have been a substantial misjudgment there on my part) and chose the latter. That then became interesting because it removed much of my hand from the work; a problem I'd identified with regard to the cult of personality ascribed to figures such as Picasso, Matisse, Rothko and so on. It occurred to me that the presence of the hand of the artist, especially in works related to the tradition of the Romantic Sublime, was a philosophically loaded problem I wasn't interested in contending with.

So, the process for creation and production of the work is fairly straightforward. I'll have a bunch of noise floating around in my head until such time as it coalesces into some kind of apprehensible

signal that suggests an object that isn't a solution but is, rather, a manifestation of the root questions that brought it into being. I'll then do some rough sketches of the idea prior to working with my digital model-maker to generate renderings to see if it's worth pursuing. If it is my model-maker and I will begin to blueprint it and then, if necessary, generate auto-cad drawings or whatever will be necessary for a fabricator to make it. In the end I tend to receive a bunch of finished or semi-finished parts that go out to other vendors for completion and/or to be assembled, cleaned and installed. It's all fairly normal unless you consider that it's a totally useless thing in relation to the transactional utilitarian nature of human societies and most often made on spec without any idea regarding its ultimate disposition in the world.

What do you find most gratifying and most frustrating about being an art maker? Any particular things you might want to say?

CE: I prefer the term art-worker over artist and/or artmaker. For me the most gratifying experiences in relation to my work are when a piece or an exhibition becomes the grounds for a real and genuine exchange with someone new. It's always amazing to me when the work functions as an intermediary with regard to the creation of a new

relationship.

I think frustration comes with the territory. I like to say to people that I have both the best job and the worst job in the world. The best job is as a result of being able to focus on what truly interests and inspires me while the worst job is to be a sole proprietor and to be running a business in an industry as fickle as ours.

How much depends on the reaction of viewers that you feel the success of a piece of art you have made?

CE: In the end I don't really worry about this too much although I am committed to a communication medium and I do wish to be understood, at least to some extent. However, at the end of the day I'm interested in satisfying my own curiosity and it's my hope that others might find that stimulating. Of course, a guy has to eat, so one does hope that the interest of others might translate into the odd sale once in a while.

Hyperobjects are objects which have a vitality to them, but you can't touch them, like race or class, or climate change. What body of work of yours does this define?

CE: Hyperobject is a term I came across a few of years ago that seems to encapsulate what I



Christian Eckart, Studio, 2017

(Far left, studio view) *Sacra Conversazione Painting - Versione Follia*, 2015. Acrylic urethane on aluminum. 78" x 69" x 17" overall.

thought I was trying to do with my overall body of work. Because my work has primarily been concerned with reverse engineering and disclosing the mechanics the Northern Romantic Sublime I have found myself deploying multiple series and bodies of work in the form of various types of meta-paintings (generally predicated upon tropes of 20th century abstraction such as the monochrome, grid paintings, white paintings, etc.) that attempt to locate the surface of what one might call "the ineffable." I know, that's a mouthful. What I mean by that is that I believe such an activity or practice would ultimately help us to reveal aspects of ourselves to ourselves in a useful and informative way. It's my belief that humans are predisposed to needs for meaning and purpose and that those concerns don't always manifest in particularly useful and healthy ways. I believe such examination is absolutely necessary. An easier way to talk about this might be to say, "I don't know if there is a god or not but what I do know is that, at a minimum, the notion of "god" is a manmade construct. And as such that construct is the basis for concepts that are not necessarily properties of human beings; truth, beauty, justice, love, etc., but are, in fact, attributes of an idealized construct that allow us then to structure and maintain society. They are the ideals we attempt to live

up to and which are necessary regardless of whether we choose to believe in a god or not." For a long time, I felt as though I was working alone in the wilderness. But recently there is beginning to emerge a body of theory that supports and affirms the ways in which I've been thinking and working. The most well-known book that I've read that, for me, aligns with my thinking is "Sapiens" by Yuval Noah Harari. I couldn't possibly recommend a book more. It's an extraordinarily subversive book that will turn the world upside down for readers who can actually grasp what Harari is attempting to convey.

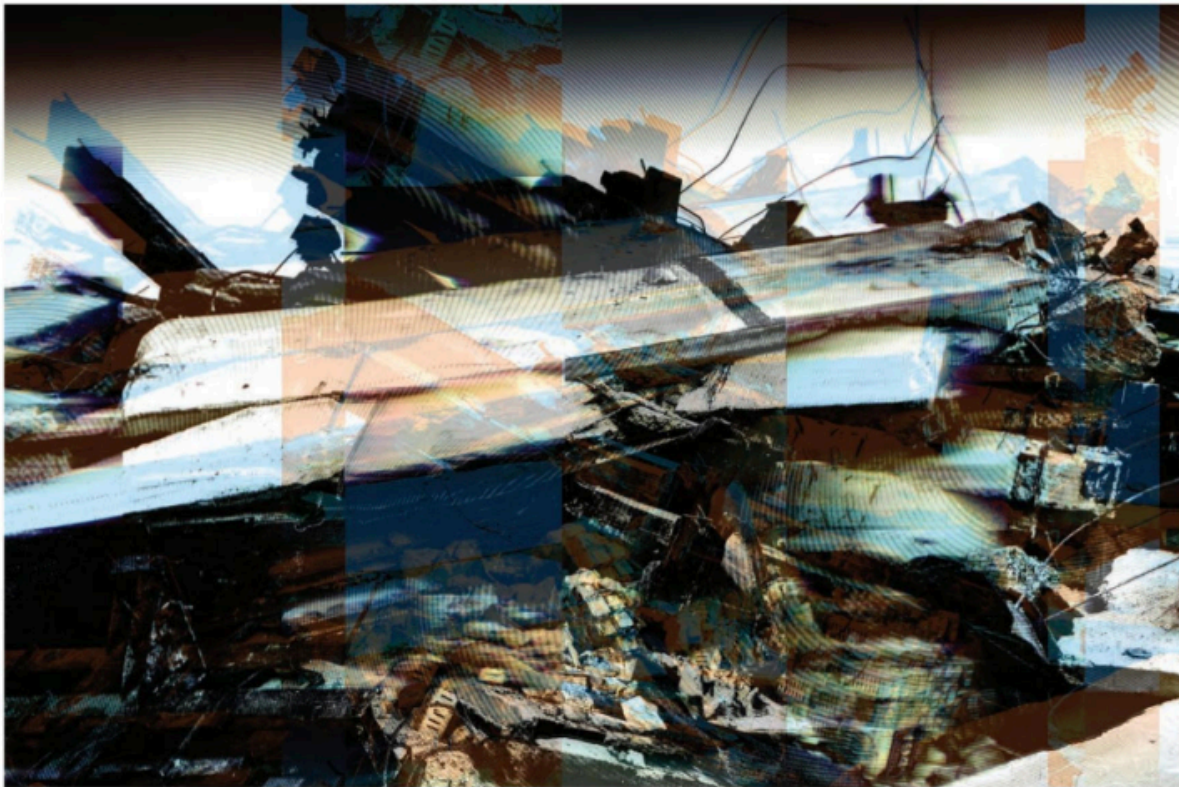
Speaking of essential books, the book "Ways of Seeing" by John Berger, was on my must-read list given to me by art professors at SVA and NYU. I wonder, what is your opinion of this book? Is it outdated? Aside from the book, "Sapiens" by Yuval Noah Harari, what are some of your other top shelf books/pods, videos, gallery exhibits, that you suggest?

CE: I don't think it's possible for that book to be outdated although it is possible that it should be read with an understanding that it comes from a specific period in much the same way that many such books will have to be read going forward. Here's a short list of books that would be rec-

ommended reading if I were still teaching and that haven't already been mentioned elsewhere here;

- Theories of Modern Art – Herschel Browning Chipp
- Matter and Memory – Henri Bergson
- Painting as Model – Yves-Alain Bois
- Life Against Death, Loves Body, Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis – Norman O. Brown
- Transfiguration of the Commonplace – Arthur Danto
- Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition – Robert Rosenblum
- The Body in Pain and On Beauty and Being Just – Elaine Scarry
- Other Criteria – Leo Steinberg
- The Anxious Object – Harold Rosenberg
- Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees – Lawrence Wechsler
- Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson, by Camille Paglia
- Renaissance Meta-Painting – edited by Peter Bokody and Alexander Nagel

Of course, most of these books belong to a time when I was still deeply engaged in developing my ideas and seeking to discover some language and tools for conveying my thoughts and concerns. I provide this list with the request that the reader *Continued on next page...*



Christian Eckart, *Medusa*, 2022. Digital artwork in progress; approximately 50 - 75% finished. Materials and size not yet determined.

understands that literally hundreds of extraordinary books have been excluded for purposes of brevity. I almost always also recommend that people read William Gibson (in order if possible) as well as Neal Stephenson, especially the *Baroque Cycle* and especially if you're trying to make sense of why the West is as it is.

What are some of the important issues that artists face today, do you think?

CE: For me the greatest challenge facing artists today is the fragmentation and dis-integration of the social. In the past art-making has always been dependent upon a high degree of buy-in from the society from which it's been gestated, which is to say that society, although not monolithic, has, in the past, been constructed upon a foundation of consensually established norms, facts, beliefs and values, etc. Artworks have the potential to be meaningful when they're addressing and responsive to more homogeneous, coherent, social, political, economic and spiritual conditions. There may be potential power to be found within the current circumstances of free-for-all and the collapse of old orders that we're witnessing but I certainly haven't been able to grasp it yet.

Living now in Texas, I hope you are happy. I know of your small band of pups, so I see there is a lot of love being shared. What truly makes you feel alive? Is it when you ponder thoughts such as why do we need to make art? Any good answers come up for you lately?

CE: Houston Texas works for me in a number of ways. It's a major American city with all the requisite frills and accessories of any major metropolitan center while at the same time reminiscent of my hometown, Calgary, in Western Canada. The people are grounded in the way I recall Calgarians being with similar (historically) primary industries, energy and agriculture. On the other hand, there isn't the energy and vitality of Williamsburg, Brooklyn or of New York City that I used to feed off of.

Living in Texas has allowed me to extend my practice as an art-worker, however. It's created a permission for me to continue to develop my interests and work in a way that I might not have been able to do in NY where I would probably have been under pressure to stay in a specific lane and to exert a lot of energy on the maintenance of a career rather than on the actual work. I'm not saying that that's the case for artists who choose to remain in NY, but I am saying that I needed to leave in order to be able to continue to pursue my interests on my own terms.

Yes, my wife and I have a quartet of awesome dogs and, despite the fact that I live in the center of the city, in the museum district, I've become a bearded guy that lives in a compound with dogs; which is totally awesome and wonderful to be honest.

I understand you hosted a large group of art viewers at your studio. Describe what that was all about? Is this a normal part of your schedule to do with people?

CE: Yes, I recently hosted two large studio events - one for the Holocaust Museum Houston with about a hundred attendees and then one with a collector group from the Orange County Museum from Laguna Beach, California. I have to admit that I kind of bombed for the former event; it was just too many people and they seemed not particularly sensitive to my concerns and interests. However, I totally made up for it with the second group and was adrenalized for a couple of weeks after that one. I'm much better, I think, one or two people at a time when I can go very deep in the weeds, but I do enjoy the challenge of engaging with large groups and try to accommodate that three or four times a year when I can.

Can you tell us which painting from another century in time holds much fascination for you and why?

CE: I would have to say that Holbein's "Dead Christ" at the Kunstmuseum in Basel is the painting that comes to mind first. I've thought about it extensively and have written about it for a catalog essay for an exhibition I was asked to co-curate for the Aldritch Museum in 1999. I still think it's one of the most challenging, provocative and subversive artworks ever produced. I've recently been thinking, again, a great deal about Goya's Black Paintings as well as Van Der Weyden's "Descent From The Cross" and Heironymous Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" all of which can be seen at the Prado in Madrid. I'm also very fascinated by the Flemish Masters of the Northern



Christian Eckart working in studio



The Descent from the Cross,
Rogier van der Weyden



St. Francis in the Desert,
Giovanni Bellini

Renaissance collectively known as the Neo-Primitives. And obviously I'm somewhat obsessed with the tradition of the Northern Romantic Sublime and would point to artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner, James McNeill Whistler, Gustav Klimt, through to modern figures such as Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman up to and including Richard Serra who I believe is the end-point of that particular lineage. However, the painting I've probably spent the most time in front of is Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert" at the Frick. When I lived in New York I would visit it at least once a month on average.

In what works that you've made have you applied notions of the liminal?

CE: Over the course of my career I've made many works that deal with the notion of the "liminal." My interest in this has predominantly been to disclose and objectify the use of works of art as thresholds for enlightenment and transcendence. For me works of art, and especially paintings in this case, are a lot like Jean Cocteau's mirror in the film *Orpheus*, occupying a space between this world and another virtual one that is the manifestation of a uniquely separate universe operating in accordance to its own rules, physics and reality. I have played with this interest in my work through the use of devices such as frames, orifices, apertures and mirrored surfaces amongst other elements. With many of my various series I've tried to conjure a dialectic of the material and the immaterial and in some cases the subject of the work

is actually an empty space that's been framed.

What are your thoughts when I pose this idea to you: The sacred is always with us, even if we sometimes fail to see it. Would this relate to your art making at all?

CE: I'm not sure that this is going to be an answer to your question. However, I've been very interested, over the span of my career, in extolling the spiritual while disclaiming the religious. People often use the terms interchangeably which seems to be a substantial theoretical error. For me what the two terms represent are almost diametrically opposed. The spiritual/sacred is a space of beingness and oneness with the cosmos and is available in the simplest of ways. Virtually anytime one is living in the moment, whether it be with their dogs or grandchildren or on a bench by a river or with a book or just focusing on their breath one is in the space of the spiritual. When one has chosen to outsource being and presence to an ideology, dogma, charismatic figure or belief system then one has entered the space of the religious and it's just a short step from there to a fascism of some sort or another which is something we're seeing unfold in front of our eyes in real time at this particular moment. That's not to say, however, that a person can't have a spiritual experience through religion.

With my constructed hybrid works I've always sought to present the viewer with a mechanism that obligates presence or being present in the present. Although those works might refer to a

history of a certain type of object making, they also, primarily, refer to themselves and their construction. Thereby, ideally, producing the conditions whereby the observer becomes aware of themselves engaged in the act of observing, which, I would argue, is the objectification of their interaction with the work and the point where art, as a verb, exists for me.

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On the Cover:

(Left) Small Cloudroom Field, 2022. Aluminum, stainless steel, spring steel and dichroic glass. Approximately 48" x 24" x 8" overall.

(Right) Sacra Conversazione - Versione Folgia, 2015. Acrylic urethane on aluminum. 78" x 69" x 17" overall.