

Mousse Magazine



CONVERSATIONS

Lewis Stein “Works from 1968–1979” at ESSEX STREET, New York

Lewis Stein and Alex Bacon in conversation.

LEWIS STEIN: I did lots of different things when I started making art as a student at UC Berkeley, but it all eventually crystallized in the work from the 1970s that I’m now showing at Essex Street. First I made boxes—I was influenced by Arman, of course. I did a box of painted red peas, for example. That led to the hammers. Those came before the paintings, actually. I had the idea for the paintings in a two-dimensional drawing class. We did color exercises, which were helpful, and then we had to make a painting. I spent two of the worst weeks of my life wrestling with this problem.

ALEX BACON: What was your solution?

LS: A small square canvas gessoed white, and tangent to the bottom a centered pink square. In my third quarter I got a studio in downtown Oakland. Daydreaming there, I had the vision for the first series of paintings, like a gift from heaven. [laughs] But I didn’t put other things aside completely, especially not the object pieces. I refined the paintings by developing a technique, randomizing the whole thing: numbers decided by the flip of a coin determined the placement of forms.

AB: Did you know about John Cage using chance to determine his musical compositions?

LS: Absolutely. I had read *Silence* (1961). I was also aware of the Dadaists. Cage wasn't the first person to use chance.

AB: You wanted to remove yourself as the author?

LS: Right, and accept whatever came up, because the paintings are more than just visual. A Kenneth Noland painting is visual, but these were something else.

AB: Would you call them conceptual?

LS: That's a funny word. I've called myself a conceptual artist, but I don't really like that terminology. It can mean a lot of things. But it's better than calling me a painter.

AB: So you didn't identify as a painter?

LS: Not at all. I was using painting to deconstruct painting. I wasn't thinking of making fun of painting, but they're funny paintings.

AB: Eventually you left school and moved back to New York?

LS: Yes. Brian O'Doherty came to Berkeley as a visiting critic and, through my professor, visited my studio. I told him I wanted to go to New York, and he recommended I see the famous dealer Richard Bellamy. So in 1968 I did. I liked Bellamy. He never sold my work or represented me, but he helped me a lot. He introduced me to Nick Wilder, David Whitney, and Rolf Rieke, who were my early dealers. My first show was at Wilder's Los Angeles gallery in May 1969, and the next show was in New York with Whitney that December. Andy Warhol came to the opening. It was a funny time of year, not too many other people came! I also had a surrogate of myself there. I hired an actor to dress in black and lie on the floor in a way that was homologous to the way the forms lie on the bottom of the canvases.

AB: What did you want the viewer to get out of the paintings?

LS: This is going to sound really odd, but I think anxiety is probably the best response. If you get anxious with the paintings then you will get some insight into them. Marcia Tucker had an interesting reaction in my studio when she came to choose a piece for the 1969 Whitney Annual. I don't remember the exact words she used, but something to the effect that the work seemed rational, but was in fact irrational, ha.

AB: What artists were important to you?

LS: Marcel Duchamp influenced me, of course. Also Warhol and Ad Reinhardt. Reinhardt's paintings are very different from mine, but the sensibility is similar I think. He was also an anti-painting painter.

AB: What about your contemporaries?

LS: Robert Morris would be the standout. I saw a photograph of the Green Gallery show he did of the gray plywood pieces. I had an interest in the physical relationship to things, and I guess I understood that just from the photograph.

AB: Those works are almost like props. In a way they make me think of your object pieces.

LS: Those works of mine are concerned with how cultural objects and signs affect the body. Some pieces prohibit the body's movement, while in others—like the buzzer, or the garbage can—a movement can be completed, but with no tangible result. These "work" for the viewer whether or not he or she presses the buzzer or opens the garbage can. They have a pull, they have a life, in a

sense. Once the viewer sees the piece they are engaged with it. We see the world in terms of possibility, and the human-made world is constructed through human interaction, even the streets and sidewalks. But we take it for granted. This work is about not taking it for granted.

AB: What happens when we don't take our environment for granted?

LS: We become much more conscious of our movement through space, and the things exerting force on us. I took a "primitive" art class at Berkeley and the takeaway was that the world was alive for those people. That is what I wanted for our modern world—to emphasize how we can make it alive for ourselves.

AB: So the work is not negative? Because one could read it as being about the toughness of New York in the 1970s. For example, one of the works is a billy club.

LS: The billy club was one of the first ones I did, in 1968. It was definitely related to the police violence of that moment, like in Chicago at the Democratic convention, where the police used billy clubs. There's something common to each piece, but they each have their own aspect as well. Like the other object works, the billy club engages with the bodily, and potential use. It also has a political reference. But the viewer is not supposed to dwell on that. Like the paintings, these works are also ultimately funny. In the installation at Essex Street the stanchions and railings render parts of the gallery off-limits. You can ring the buzzer but nothing happens. The handles are something that would normally open a door, but here they mock you by not allowing you to do anything. They attract you but they don't deliver, because you can only look at them. All brought together they establish a force field—you're attracted and you're repelled. All my works are interactive, but not obviously so. Mostly you're limited. But, like the paintings in fact, if you stay with them, you can work through those initial disquieting feelings.

at ESSEX STREET, New York
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