

Rochelle Feinstein's work is hard to decipher. It is full of jokes, yet oddly lacking in punch lines. Unlike that of many of her postmodernist contemporaries, the elusive meaning of Feinstein's work has consistently deferred any sort of commodification. Alongside a continuous and insistent engagement with the problems of painting, she has produced video and time-based work as well as sculpture and installation, yet her works are not an intertextual pastiche or a pedagogical deconstructive tool. Ironically, they seem to continue the modernist project in spite of itself. It was said of Picabia that he was, above all, an abstractionist. For Feinstein, abstraction and non-instrumentalized thought have always reigned supreme. This makes her work particularly timely. Should we not, at the tail end of our post-modern, post-ideological era, look to those who kept the faith all along? Her paradoxically political brand of art *pour l'art* and her laissez-faire attitude toward subjects could easily be seen to prefigure the works of Rachel Harrison, or to sit alongside those of Jutta Koether, Michael Krebber, or Martin Kippenberger. Unwavering belief alternates with self-effacement, and then violently segues into an absurd surrealist game.

A friend recently related an anecdote to me concerning her own experience of a work by Rochelle Feinstein: a painting of a grid with a meandering line disrupting the order. Of course, the easy way to deal with such a work would be to posit the two elements against one another: order and self-reflexivity versus the chaotic human gesture. Familiar territory. But Feinstein's explanation of the work was quite different. The grid was Los Angeles, and the line was the path of OJ Simpson's SUV cutting through the freeway while being chased by the police. What!?!?

It was my honor and pleasure to visit Feinstein's studio last summer. We had a long conversation there concerning her most recent project, *The Estate of Rochelle F.*, followed by our attempt to hash out some of the finer points in an even longer conversation by email.

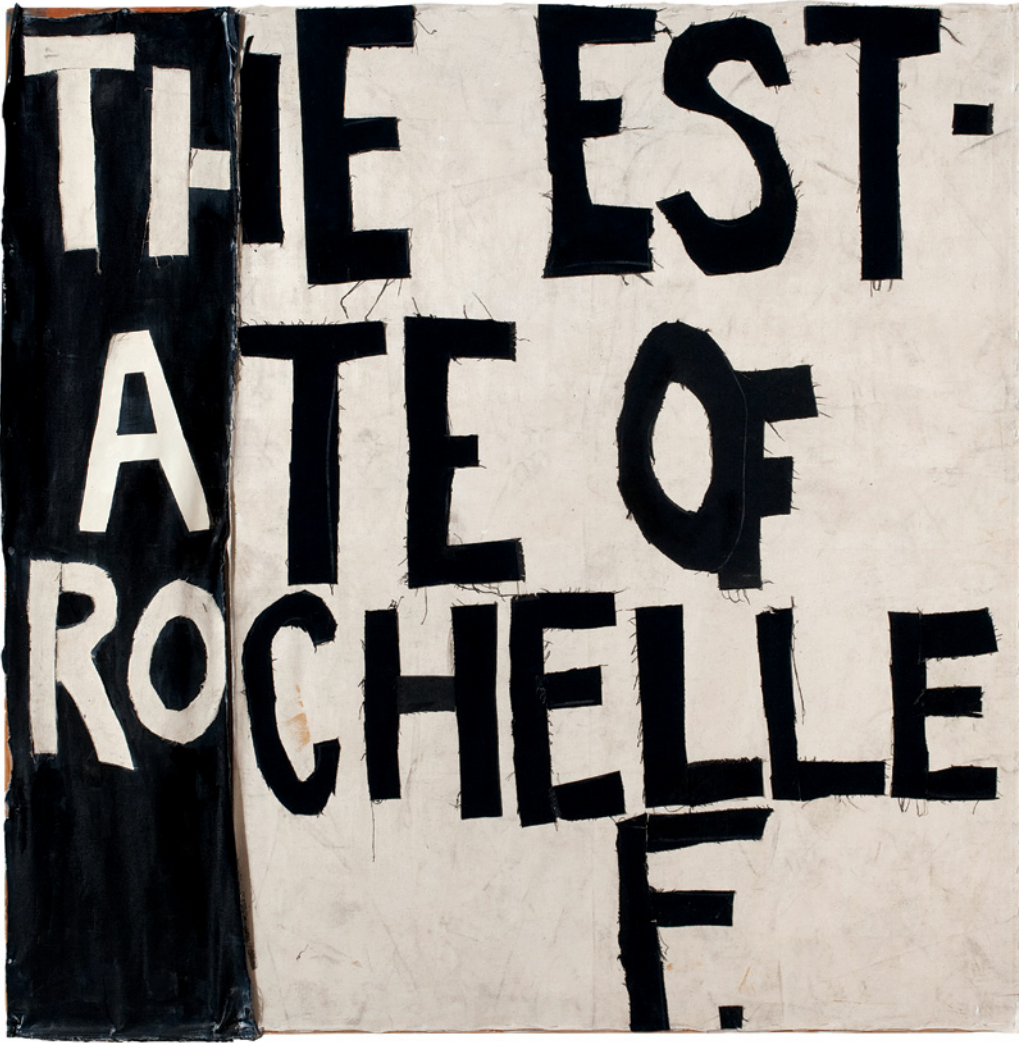
—Justin Lieberman

ROCHELLE FEINSTEIN

and
Justin Lieberman



Mr. Natural, 2010, reflective glass, crystal, charcoal oil on dropcloth, 72 x 50 inches.



**The Estate of Rochelle F., 2009, dropcloth, canvas, paper,
60 x 60 inches.**

Justin Lieberman: Your new project, *The Estate of Rochelle F.*, is retrospective, but with a deliberate revisionism, taking apart older works and rearranging the components into new things. It seems like a pretty anarchic move in relation to most people's conception of an oeuvre, but then you're still alive so...

Rochelle Feinstein: I'm a liar. I'm still here, as intended, when I began the project in 2009. I know I won't always be here, but at that time, I was mulling over the question: What is compelling to make paintings about? The economy and everything else was either in shutdown or moving backward. I'd just consolidated two storage spaces into a single archive. My studio was packed with diverse materials, including paint to make paintings from—all were useable "assets" with unrealized potential. It was an Aha! moment: I decided to use up as much of this surplus as possible to make new work. This was

a thought that had gravitas. To create an estate I would control, what would *that* be, pre-posthumously? Pre-post-humorously? Weird and interesting, to have a start and end point roll into one another, to be consciously creating a past intended as an accumulation of many paintings that would materialize as a corpus sometime in the future.

Yeah, it's a retrospective collection, assembled in the present tense... implemented as a device for me to devise new work. Revisionism is implicit in the act of recycling. In my case, both the inert materials and a few former paintings just came along for the ride, each presenting an idiosyncratic dare. Whatever inorganic stuff they are made from, how they signify, their vernacular associations (Craigslist, cardboard, placemats, snapshots, window shades, and so on), each presents a specific challenge. Their physical properties and the way we name and identify them both inevitably undergo alteration

from their original state. My actions are directed by curiosity: how do these elements partner with a painting language that is, also, an already received one? This question has been prominent in my work since 1989.

In this project, I get to tweak my own credo. *The Estate* relies on the depletion of those things already available, including older paintings. Two rules emerged rather quickly. First, to not spend any additional money on this work and to use any and all supplies as "assets." Second, to use maximal material and minimal gesture. I hope we get to anarchy and what an oeuvre is later.

JL: This reminds me of an essay by John Miller where he discusses the potential energy of art supplies, and the way that it's exhausted by their transformation into artworks, the artwork functioning as the graveyard of art supplies. Your way of working here seems to challenge that: old works are imbued with new use value. This seems to take a lot of weight out of the objects, returning it to yourself through a de-prioritizing of the idea of a "finished work." But it also brings up some weird questions in relation to the originals: Were they ever once complete? Are you defacing them?

RF: I do believe in a "finished work." Yet, if the work is still in my possession, and I've concluded that it needs to be "fluffed" because of current circumstances, then I will do so. The "original" then exists as a foundation for a new "original." I use traditional painting materials as an aesthetic choice, understanding how they behave during the working process. The use of "non-art" materials by countless artists is practically a default mode by now. Stuff, or residue of stuff, has long been part of the vocabulary of art supplies, and in many cases, has been substituted for paint. Art supplies are also pre-coded for a specific end use: to make a work of art. Employing both in one work is unexceptional. Materials are everywhere, potentially speaking, yet their transformation into a new territory of form and content, feels less likely to occur or to be something sought after. Garbage bags, textiles, hair, rubber, text, etc., are well-worn tropes. They've been indexed, categorized, homogenized, and pasteurized, absorbed as a

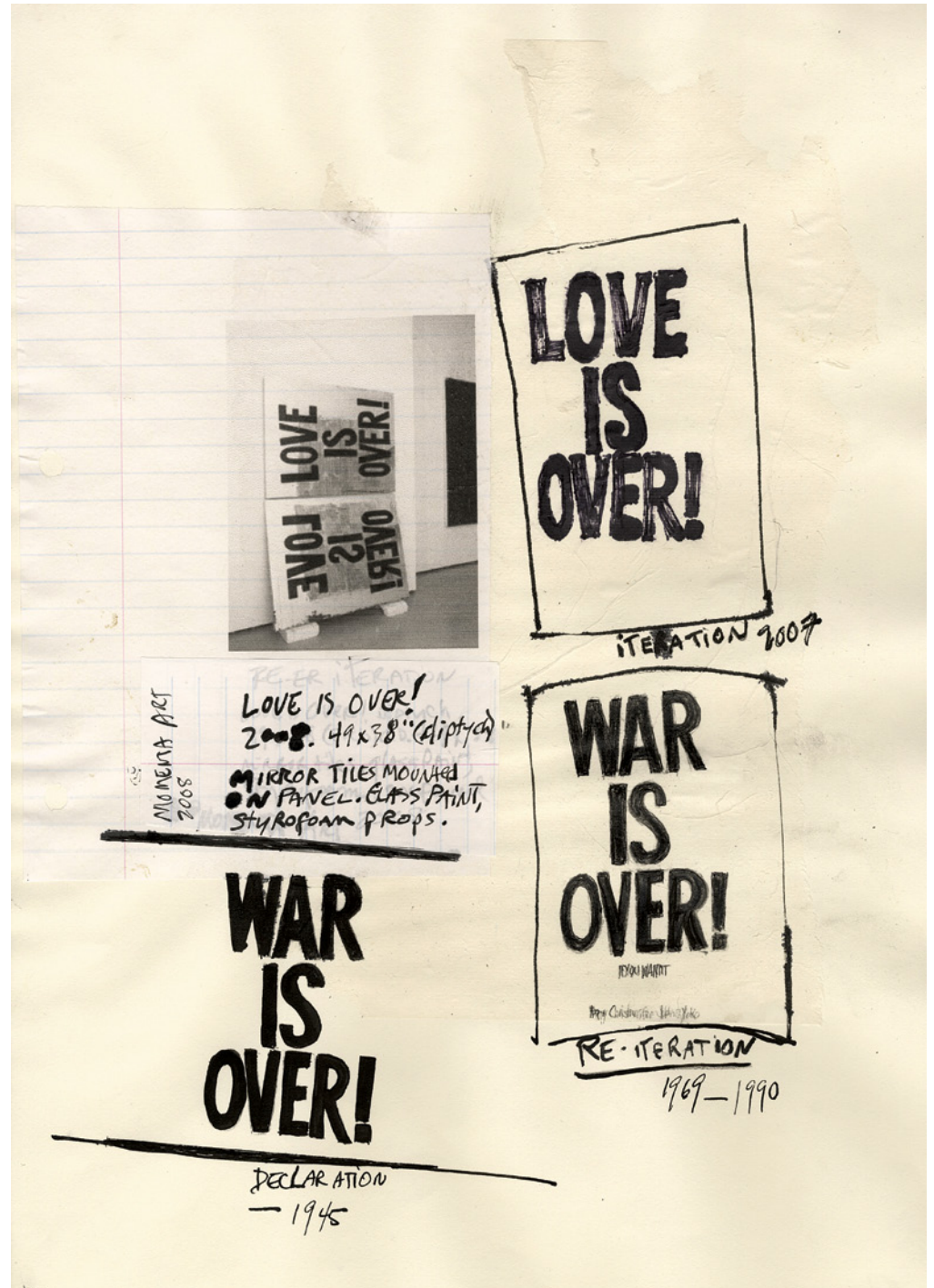
set of accrued meanings through the historical precedent of the last century, recent criticism, or via six months of social media buzz. The use of materials or materiality—when painting with a capital *P* is at stake—is encrypted into this already agreed-upon canon. For example, in 1992 I used a dishtowel in a painting. The checkbox next to my name was ticked off as follows: “feminist,” “issues of domesticity,” “anti-modernist.” Yes, I’m fortunate to have anything checked off, but my point is this: I am interested in how a perceptual experience transforms into a cognitive one. This need not begin with gender, but it could if gender was presented as the primary issue, overshadowing the read of the other elements in a work.

Warhol speaks of material transformations with eloquence in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*. He cites the mountains of unusable footage cut from the synchronized swimming scenes in Esther Williams’s films. He says something to the effect that he’d like to make a new movie from these “leftovers.” He says it’s a movie he’d like to see. And it’s a painting I’d like to make.

To your previous question: two reclaimed paintings in the Estate were lying around, nagging at me in the studio. Two other pieces were stretched and primed, but were without imagery. The remaining stretchers were bare, recycled from discarded paintings formerly in storage. There is one small painting I didn’t show you, pulled from the dust pile. I cleaned and repainted it, reproducing the sooty residue as an image, added new things, and it was finished. Yes, it was complete, and now it is a new complete. This is weird and we’ve just begun.

JL: But there is a fundamental difference between Warhol’s transformation of the Esther Williams leftover material and your treatment of your own past production, which requires a certain leap of faith, right? After all, you can’t pretend to be objective about this stuff.

RF: Yes, there are undeniably fundamental differences. My subjectivity has been a constant, annoying cop and critic. Plus, Warhol did not actually use the Williams outtakes to make a new film. What we may share is an attitude



Origin of Untitled (!) in The Estate of Rochelle F. catalog, 2010, ink and collage on paper.

that considers what is unseen, or is barely visible, as a productive place to stage a new subject. While some *Estate* paintings are built upon my earlier paintings, most are not. The rest, however, are made, at minimum, from an art supply or artifact, both vestigial leftovers from some other form of production.

JL: Are you saying you consider your early work to be barely visible? I would think that a subjective assessment of one’s own past production would send

it into glaring relief. There is an element of psychoanalysis in this revisionism. You have to deal with your own history through your associations with the works. “I was sleeping with so-and-so when I made this, etc.” Changing the work is like a confrontation with whatever personal associations reside within it. You strip it of its “pure” relation to a memory of your past self by infecting it with your present self. Maybe once you commit to altering the works, you alter them in relation to themselves rather

than in relation to external criteria?

RF: That's not at all what I meant. Let the early work sit tight, unaltered. I'm fine with that. My thoughts in 1989 were not solely about merging varied materials with paint. I was fascinated by the question of seriality and so-called signature style, neither of which, even as a young artist, I could align with or subscribe to. It was such a given for the many painters of my generation that I'd have to be comatose *not* to find this fascinating. After showing through the '80s I decided to address this in my work. of a form

is not very interesting to me, although that is the way much painting is taught, investigated, and perceived. It feels unnatural to the way I think about individual works or the accumulated works of a given artist. Back then I was too involved in feminism and activism for these engagements not to have informed my thinking as a painter. I wanted systemic change, a balls-out way of making my paintings be, actively, even aggressively, in discussion with one another. I committed to the idea that a painting done in 1995 could be partnered with something from 2009, an a-stylistic "style," each appearing to

have been made contemporaneously, yet with huge variables of content sourced from many quarters. It's *all* made from a whole cloth of recording and reacting to major or mundane experience, from my subjectivity and my encounters with subjects. I don't make serial works but, now, having said all this, perhaps the entire body of work of the last 20-odd years is a single project? The past can represent itself, and it will, in any event. The intent for *The Estate* project is to deplete those passive things not yet used, to make a new work. But before anything is cut, screwed, glued, stapled, poured, brushed, or sanded, there is feeling; all the forms follow from that. I like that you've opened the psychodynamic door.

JL: For me there are two kinds of artists: those whose work develops temporally, and those whose work expands in space, creating endless variations on a central thesis. Pure formalism generally engenders temporal development, whereas in the work of artists like HR Giger, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Salvador Dalí, or Walt Disney, there seems to be a desire to create a themed world. Your project almost seems like a transition from the thematic type to the temporal type—it engages time so unequivocally.

So the works come out of a charged emotional place, rather than one of disinterested reflection. You love a particular work, so you find a way to care for it. You respect one, so you find a way to honor it. You hate another, so you find a way to deface it. You joke around with one. You treat the works as though they are people. You form relationships with them.

RF: That's very close. I'd add that these are multiple places of feeling. One place of feeling—concerning, say, desire, anger, curiosity, exhaustion, or frustration—is quotidian. The other place of feeling, or of reflective feeling, is about painting; I can't have been doing this for so long without a charged relationship to painting. What it can and can't do, what is or is not expected from it (let's get into this?) in relation to historical or cultural imperatives... I am emotional about painting culture. Most works in this project spring from this friction. *Mr. Natural* is an example. My initial



Untitled (!), 2010, oil, acrylic, gold leaf, textile on canvas, 49 x 38 inches.



Nude Abstract, 2009, mixed media, enamel, acrylic, 36 x 36 inches.

thoughts were about American gestural abstraction—I've admired it from afar, periodically hoping my gestalt could morph into the cosmic, mystical place of a fermenting soul. At the same time, while very interested in first-generation abstract painters such as Richard Pousette-Dart, I'm impatient with latter day mark-making employed as a conveyance for fuzzy feeling. Blah. This *Mr. Natural* began taking shape through material choices . . . a canvas dropcloth, visible staples, footprints, and a ground-glass surface, slightly dangerous to the touch. The dropcloth, longer than the stretcher, could not be cut (one of my rules) hence the draping at the bottom is a natural result of the misfitting. This led to a memory of R. Crumb's *Mr. Natural*, the sybaritic alien guru-of-choice who I enlisted as my guide to the inscrutibility of generalized gestural abstraction. I arrived at a big *X*, both an index of *no*, and a territorial marking of a rectangle.

All these "places" are equally

charged with meanings, and hugely interesting to kick around, like a couple of cats in a bag, with, hopefully, a less tragic, and more subtle, resolution.

JL: This brings up a subject that is always sticky, which is the relationship to the viewer. There seems to be an oscillation in your work between an objective critical distance (which depends on a certain shared knowledge with viewers) and a reactionary anarchism that disregards the presence of viewers entirely. How do you approach the subject of what the audience doesn't know?

RF: By finding what the viewer does know, which may be equal, less, or more than what I know. Chances are that I'm as present in the world as I am in my studio and in teaching. Artists are all both producers and viewers. Ya' think? Someone asked me a question during a recent lecture: Who is my viewer? Which is really interesting

because it is so sticky. The words *audience* and *viewer* are frequently used interchangeably, but they're not. An audience represents a plurality of "stuff." A viewer is one—potentially a unit of the aggregate, a brick in the building, but no less crucial. My short answer to your question, and the one from the audience: the viewer is not anonymous. This always arises with abstract painting, and with painting in general. What do you think about what the audience doesn't know?

JL: I like the distinction between the viewer and the audience, but I don't want to think of the audience as a plurality. I would rather make some distinctions about my own audience and what they know, and then address them as such. As for the viewer, in the beginning stages of a project, I prefer to think that this person doesn't exist. Once I'm further along, I acknowledge that I am working for them, and try to find some common ground. Then I let them lead the way, and try to speak for them in such a way that the ideas seem like theirs rather than mine. Sometimes I misstep, and the viewer says "No." (When I have made jokes in bad taste, or assumed too much, for instance. Then there are bad reviews in public, and chastisements from my friends in private.) Then I backpedal furiously and try to reformulate. Finally, I assume they know everything I know and that they are sick of hearing me talk about it. I'm burned out and can't give anymore. That is always the tragic end of my romantic/antagonistic relationship with the viewer. Then it starts all over again...

RF: Quite a negotiation . . . We differ, as we should, but maybe not so much. The "stuff," that is, the knowledge of audiences, has great diversity. So, for me, it's an unfixed, randy group, changing its tastes, its database, so to speak, at accelerated speeds of acquisition, satiation, and registration. I participate as an artist who is a part of that audience and is simultaneously compelled to taking a position, a point of view, in relation to that polyglot material. Mine is not a fixed position in relation to subjects or forms. I might have just identified my position: mobility. Therefore, your romantic/antagonistic relationship of starting with "the viewer does not exist, yet" is one I might try

on, like a set of instructions, very Other to my antagonistic/romantic habituated pattern, which is “I am the viewer, and, oh, yeah, what is this supposed to mean?” Then I could romance the whole thing by trying to understand it, woo it into something with sex appeal to me. The viewer will, inevitably, return in the end.

The question “Where’s the love?”—in the big geo-world, or in the phenomenological sense—is a big part of my drive to make work and of my engagement with the viewer. It’s a roundelay. A Craigslist posting, captioned “NUDE MODEL NEEDED FOR ABSTRACT PAINTING,” had been in my files for six years before I could use it in *Untitled, Nude* (2009). Only through undertaking *The Estate* and having the necessity to use stray materials could I reframe and engage with someone else’s absurd sexual paradox, but through my cold eye. What would a nude, abstract painting look like? I could not stop thinking about the person who baited this hook. I took the bait just so I could make a work rooted in those ludicrous premises. The arguments of style, form, modernism, feminism, social media, and the distribution of some kind of information were compressed into one Craigslist solicitation paragraph. So the work is white, flat, lozenged, painted, rendered, printed, textual, assembled, and collaged—a naked abstract painting in low relief.

JL: Your position seems very generous and permissive toward the audience. Mine is all fucked-up and egomaniacal, full of resentment and a pathetic desire for acceptance. I aspire to be a bit more open. That said, I think that we are both engaged in a kind of courtship. A seduction.

There is a deliberate impoverishment of materials and means in your work, almost in an Arte Povera sense, which also references the impoverishment of culture at large rather than strictly gallery culture. There’s also an element of non-nostalgic camp in your work which I see as democratic—it’s the part that lets me in. Once I read that a gesture is “defined by its economy and grace”—I like that. But then I also read this impoverishment as a withholding, a “this is what you get.” There is a kind of altercation between the permissiveness of the camp element



Image of an Image, 2010, gold and aluminum leaf on canvas, digital image on scrim, 81 x 77 inches.

and the feminine no implicit in your abstraction. The materials and means don’t give themselves over so easily to understanding. They demand that we take responsibility ourselves. We have discussed your work in relation to feminism. Is this withholding related?

RF: I don’t feel at all generous. I instinctively steal and borrow subjects to engage with things that are not *of* me but are present in the ecosphere enough to become *me*. I may appear permissive and respectful at first, but I’m often puzzled, grabby, and mean-spirited in stealing subjects and materials. As a work begins, these bits

of information are held captive (very unsexually) until they cooperate with the conditions I propose with paint, scale, and color decisions. This is where I butt up against subject: Where is it, exactly? What are its margins, limits? The third part is the most vexing and complex one: What do I have to offer? My beliefs, perceptions, understandings... How does a thing get made so that it becomes an aggregate of socially generated subjects and materials, painting rules and regulations to do or be undone, and my own skill, or lack thereof, and, ultimately, an object that proposes, through its stubborn stillness,



The Little Engine (triptych), 2005–2008, mixed media, canvas, 79 × 240 inches.

the active movement of thinking?

I like boxing, so in regard to the idea of an altercation, great! Most people think of an altercation as a street fight, a brawl; anything goes. But boxing is a match: a codified set of rules and strategies men and women learn, rehearse, and apply. Boxers vary in height, weight, age, talent, technique, physical and mental agility, versatility. The match-up may not always be ideal, but whether it's a three-round novice fight or a twelve-round bout, the ring is always the same size—a grid within which you must gain control through the use of all available tools. I'm for any art that uses the tools and rules for gain. I think of my studio activity as more nuanced than a brawl: locate the grid, find the center, don't square up, keep moving, create an opening, and be alert to ones that suddenly present themselves. The altercation—well, it's just *bam bam bam*—an event quickly produced, enacted, gone. Not too much to chew over in the end.

In relation to the feminine *no* that you detect, that's a yes. The question of value as specifically related to an impoverishment of means, in this particular project, not my work as a whole, is a *yes*...

JL: Are you playing with me? That's a *no*, yes?

RF: Okay, I am playing. You're correct. It is the feminine *no*: a way of giving meaning to loss. *The Estate* taken as a construct is, fundamentally, facing loss as a productive act. It has felt

performative somehow, but not in the sense of a work of performance art or a durational event. Even working figuratively was never an option for my work. An object elicits zero empathy; it's not sentient. It's more of an obstacle to feeling. My *no* and the obstacle are co-dependents. I'm reminded of a legendary story that I heard first-hand but of which I remember only the outlines. At a public lecture at Columbia University on the philosophy of language, someone was saying that a double negative could become a positive but a double positive cannot become a negative. From the rear of the hall, philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser shouted, "Yeah, yeah." This is the way I mean my *no*.

JL: Hilarious. I think of your *no* as a negation that does not involve an imposition of will. It is a sacrifice of something that you want for the sake of maintaining the structure of the self, a denial to the self for the self. It is not a simple "no means yes" thing, though. You might associate it with the Bartleby stance: "I would prefer not to." Bartleby sacrifices everything through this *no*: his job, his place in society, his freedom, and, ultimately, his life. And what does he gain from his sacrifice? Nothing that we can perceive. That is why it is so disruptive! His refusal to participate causes havoc all around him. It is tremendously romantic, almost impossibly so. That is how I perceive your project.

RF: Negation has been a productive

force in my studio, and acutely so for the last 18 months. A couple of years ago, the dBfoundation gals proposed a project to a group of artists based upon Bartleby's stance. I think it was for T-shirts. I could not come up with anything for them. I now realize the reason—it was an already-announced cultural negation. I have to find my own negation, it must be all mine. For example, to reject figuration as sentient, too loaded, is to negate my body. I can't quite do that, but I can "prefer not" to deal with "the body" as a construct examined, denounced, re-constituted, reformulated as "social" bodies. Make any sense?

JL: Perfect sense. I feel the same way. I find the bandwagon oppressive. Especially in relation to this particular issue, because a bunch of Bartlebys standing around in a room together completely shuts down debate. It is a boring party. The refusal is no longer disruptive if it becomes a convention. Then it is merely a coquettish game.

RF: And you offer a perfect example. If our works were installed in a room, together, there would definitely be debate. Unless, of course, we occupied the space as a position, in collaboration. That would smooth the read of the work. This seems to be a common experience, amongst artists, consensual parties, and teachers of art. As far as this consistency goes, choosing "a direction" as an individual, amplifying it through sequential, repeatable presentation of works, I'd prefer not to.

As I'm making paintings, I'm occupied by thinking about the discussion they create with one another—is it a somber argument, are they mocking each other?—as well as the contradictions inherent inside each piece.

JL: Tell me about the shower curtain.

RF: Thank you for a simple question! Everyone calls it a shower curtain. I'm learning to live with that. It's actually two panels of a scrim with a digital print, to scale, of the painting it hangs in front of. I applied gold and aluminum leaf to each quite recently, using the print like a paint-by-numbers template. It's probably more straightforward than my description. Should I go further? The title is *An Image of an Image*.

JL: So there is a distancing going on? What was the image originally?

RF: It is an act of distancing that provides me with space for speculation. I've got to go backward a little. The image was initially the third element in a 2008 triptych titled *The Little Engine*. The title is borrowed from *The Little Engine That Could*, an early 20th-century children's book that I read many times over as a child—my *Mother Goose*—about the triumph of will over adversity. It's a moral tale, as well as a parable of American modernism. My triptych began with this quote from the South African artist Zwelethu Mthethwa: "Art in our day is not really done for art's sake; it questions issues related to global processes such as urban industrialization, identity crisis, gender, race and social imbalance." The middle painting of the *Engine* was based on a photo of a bullet-riddled windshield. But the *Image of an Image* you ask about—this was initially the caboose of the "engine," and was developed without an external textual or visual reference. Gold and aluminum leaf was applied to canvas and an image took hold—either of a wall or a map in a state of assemblage or deconstruction—while the leafing brought other iconic, slippery representations to mind.

Back to the scrim—or curtain—it was a digital image, intended to hang as part of the triptych, but I decided not to add it. *The Little Engine* was completed without the addition, and the scrim was stored. *Image of an Image* has become

Boxers vary in height, weight, age, talent, technique, physical and mental agility, versatility. The match-up may not always be ideal, but whether it's a three-round novice fight or a twelve-round bout, the ring is always the same size—a grid within which you must gain control through the use of all available tools. I'm for any art that uses the tools and rules for gain.

a painting independent of the earlier triptych. I had leftover foil that I leafed onto the scrim; with the additions, the potential was realized, as a material is projected upon and through—it's reflective and transparent, so the doubling of image then varies with the available light source. The making of this thing, involving processes handmade, digital, sewn, and fabricated, was immensely satisfying as it was dictated by what I thought the object needed rather than by a priori decisions.

JL: What does it mean to state "Art in our day..." on a painting in such a clear, general way? It seems bizarre. It insists that this is what *art* is, for *everyone*, and assumes an almost impossible authority. I am tempted of course to reply: Who are you to say what it is?

RF: Those were key questions for me before I thought of making *The Little Engine*: Who is being addressed? Who is doing the addressing? I was not just tempted to ask, but I did ask: Who are you to say what it is? Yet, while I agree with the urgency of social subject matters (social imbalance, identity, environmental issues, etc.) they have become so accessible within art production and art education as to be nearly a prescriptive form. They're verging on becoming as ossified as gestural abstraction has within the visual landscape. Who doesn't think about socially generated circumstances? Who doesn't

parse an art object as a social being? I wanted to make the painting look like a poster, an announcement, or a demand, and motivate it retinally to stumble over the words. For real. We talked earlier about the relationship of viewer to audience, and finding a "place of feeling." Yes, anger, consternation, and admiration—how could I make what was an already complicated condition to an even slower read, making it a more vexing experience than it already was? By trying to engage with the question visually. Who am I to make a painting about this? Agency is the answer to this question: I am the artist.