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Tuesday November 17th '87

Dear Leon,

Excuse delay. (Don't buy a Canon Tpestar 7 electronic type-writer unless you desire a heart attack. It's got no "memory" so I couldn't, can't , correct as I go along)

Here's the rough draught , almost verbatim of our delightful chat. It's mile too long. But my editor in Milan will attack it ruthlessly to bring it into shape-about 2000 words. But he's very good. No fears. All I'd like is you to glance at the gist of it, any errors like Jasper Johns beer can, instead of 'Coca Cola' bottles, just mark them. Dont' worry about spelling, typos, etc that'll all be taken care of ^{by} the capable staff of "Flash Art", who I'm happy to say will soon be getting a 'fax ' machine so I can give it them over the phone.

Alas they don't have one yet. So it hand courier leaving on Sunday. (But I have another long article to finish by then

as well, so be merciful Leon, and be as efficient as you were with language and Bob was with tea and I won't collapse from overwork.) Read it, mark the copy (I have others), and add or change (within reason) things that bother you but remember it's going to halved anyway. So be geometric minimal. My editor will trim my verbal excesses as well. What he likes is a strong combative, aggressive question and answer, that's the reason I'm there.

So read it. Check it out for sense, rather than grammar/structure etc and call me as soon as you can Tuesday afternoon after 4.p.m (I'll be sleeping) or working on my other text; and I'll come briefly to your delightful 14th floor studio to talk in the evening - on the way to or from my health club.

Titles: I've got a few ideas (Still Looking After All These Years, On Top at 81, First Not Second - all run by your name, but again that's my editor's job. If you - or Bob - have any ideas I'll certainly include them with the text. No big deal!!

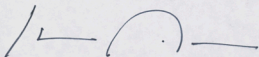
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Also pictures to go with the text: choose the ones we talked about or you think appropriate. Marco says he can get anything I want in hours if he doesn't have it.

That's it. Bit wordy - and "eager" Leon but that's my style.

Looking forward to hearing from you this afternoon

Best

A stylized handwritten signature consisting of a series of connected loops and a horizontal line at the end.

James Collins

* I've included the snaps I took - and I'm sure they'll use one or some as well as your work. We also the racoon one.

Copy 2

②

LEON POLK SMITH

interview by
James Callow Nov 1957

(EXCUSE mess)

Leon
Mondrian beginning missing! I could
ask you again. No problem) Just a couple of questions

①

I wasn't talking about what it does. I was just mentioning it as one kind of technique. And when I was ^{finished with this} liberated, at the same time I discovered how to use the curvilinear form to express the equilibrium of the form in space where it could be interchangeable

JC The positive negative thing?

LPS: Yes the same thing. I was completely liberated from that little technicality which you speak of, as far as putting the paint on much freer, ~~letting it flow on, get rid of it.~~

JC: Did that mean you did more paintings. Suddenly your production changed?

LPS: Oh yes. Of course!

JC: Like what?

LPS: How many I did? Let's say if through the 40's I did two dozen paintings a year, or less, after I started with curvilinear forms and using a different technique I could do many more than that.

JC: And you did ?

LPS yes.

In terms of scale there's a kind of European feeling not timid ity but a certain reference to Europe in the early work you've left behind in the later ones.

LPS: If you remember very few people were doing large paintings in the 40's, that came more in the 50's, and the 60's. Getting into the early 50's I too had the feeling, even in the late

JC How does an L differ from a rightangle...?

LPS: Well an L contains a rightangle. But all rightangles you don't ~~call them L's~~... *are not called L's*

JC: Forgive my poetic language. You live in a beautiful loft, 14 floors above Union Square, and I noticed the binoculars on your window ledge, for watching the specklike people below. ^MMore importantly in this half loft, half studio, it's chocka-block with ^{your own} work from very different periods of your life. ~~Paint-~~
~~ings~~ and elegantly displayed. Are your paintings in the sense you describe as similar to an author surrounded by his reference books. Books to dip into for reference or comfort or solace, or ideas. Is that how you view your paintings?

I should say yes.

LPS: I'm always changing them. I may take out a painting I haven't had up for a year or even longer

JC You keep changing ~~it~~... —

LPS: I was just in the process of telling you, ~~and finish off~~
~~without it being correct~~. So if you wait until I finish a sentence, or whatever I'm speaking about, it will help a great deal! If I get back to where I left off, I may decide ~~I don't want to see this painting anymore~~, take it down and put up something else. I'll go to the rack and look through, and see one I haven't looked at ^{recently} ~~in eight years~~, or even two or three months. I want to look at that a while, so I take one down and put another one up. And with that sort of thing, there's always a change. ^{recently} If I haven't seen a painting in a quite a while, I may see it in a different light.

Because our mind is always a little behind our subconscious or unconscious our intuition. I'll give you an illustration ~~about~~: I did a painting about 20 years ago and when ~~I~~ finished ~~it~~ I put it on the wall and ~~looked at it~~ and said "That's a complete failure! ~~Don't have anything!~~ I'll stick it in the rack ~~for another~~ ~~comes up~~, and do another painting. About a year later, I went to my studio one morning, and thought I could use that stretcher frame now, ~~and take that old painting off~~. ~~I~~ Pulled it out, and ~~I~~ hung it on the wall, next to another painting about the same size, and what happened? Something had happened ~~in it~~ during that year. And it was one of my masterpieces! I saw immediately! My intuition did a painting a ~~little~~ ~~bit~~ beyond my conscious appreciation. It took a year for my conscious appreciation to catch up. Everyone who sees that paintings says that's one of your great paintings, A year earlier I was ready to destroy it.

~~JP: That was a 20 year gap you say?~~

~~LPS: No I said it was 20 years ago. It was only a one year gap.~~

~~A painting I did 20 years ago, one year later I saw it was a good painting. A year earlier I was ready to destroy it.~~

~~JC: Talking about surfaces. I notice in the painting you talk about as important — the one you kept — there seems to be an arbitrary ^{surface}. The surface varies from each section of the painting. The white is a different kind of intensity (number of layers or whatever) from the black. And there is still quite an appreciable trace of the directional marks of the brush, ~~and~~ Even in the later ones there quite a jump of surface reading?~~

~~LPS: Was that conscious?~~
~~I don't fully get your question...~~

(4)

JC: A lumpy reading; a semigloss black, a medium-matte white, and also streaks in the black. Things like that.?

LPS: Age. I would say is the reason for that: I didn't paint it with a streaked black. Not my intention. And if it is changed it's weather, ^{it} temperature.

JC:

LPS: A painting like 'BlackBlack' 1950 has an almost quirky Paul Klee-like quality. Although rectilinear the lines are not straight. Very Klee-like..

LPS: That was 1950, already I was getting away from the strict vertical/horizontal. And ~~you're~~ moving towards a curve. And ~~you've already acknowledged that they weren't straight lines any longer. Helped me to~~ ^{which} evolved into what I was searching for.
the right curved linear form to express "form-space" equilibrium.

JC: Was Klee an influence?

LPS: I would say not, although in the 30's when I was a student I loved Klee. I studied every brush stroke; but what Klee offered ~~I don't think I~~ ^{was not} used in my work.

JC: Another question about influence. In 'Black White Repeat 1952/1953, the influences coming to mind, I'm not ~~an~~ a particular specialist on dates, more on the crossrelations between artists Vasarely?

LPS: I never heard of Vasarely when I did that painting...

JC: But Vasarely was active in 1952..

LPS: Not here...

JC
~~LPS:~~ Can you tell me names I'd know?

LPS: None of the artists was represented by a gallery, but they invited Mondrian for example. But it was nice for them because they could combine their resources and rent a gallery and have a big exhibition once a year with one or two paintings in it by each artist. That was good for them. So they invited Mondrian one time. So they had Mondrian down as a member of the American Abstract Artists Group. Diller was pretty much the same way. Bourgoyne Diller that is...

JC Was he a friend Diller?

LPS: Yes he was. We both showed at the same gallery.....

JC What number gallery was that?

LPS It was my 15th. In the late 60's. The gallery's still there. But they don't show anymore. It's not open to the public. They have a great collection of and they handle the Arp estate. Mrs Challette sells Arps by appointment but they don't have any shows.

JC: Talking about Arp is an interesting point...

LPS: Although Diller and I were friends our work was never similar in any way. Diller was one of the few people whose work was influenced by Mondrian who developed his own style. You can't find in any of Diller's work that refers to mine. And you can't find anything in my work that refers to Diller's. Our work was very very different.

6

even further back

JC: Jumping ~~back~~ from Diller to Arp. Arp's someone who used similar positive negative in a strong curvilinear way, quite early in the 20's I believe. He was using the curved form ^{a lot} in Europe. Was Arp and influence?

LPS: I was aware of him. I was introduced to the work of Arp, Brancusi, and Mondrian at the same time about 1936. I was studying at Columbia University ^{one} was a naturalist painter ~~with~~ ^{she said} these are the most important

artists in the world today — hours talking with me. — Spent —

about them

a professor said to me who

JC And these were...?

LPS: Mondrian, Arp, and Brancusi..

JC: And the dates?

LPS 1936

JC Nice story.

because ^{throwing European names at you} as I said earlier ^{because I'm interested} in the cross fertil-
iation between all movements. ^{Special obs-}
ession. You talk a lot about activating space by the curve ^{space? Rubin's}
and gestalt psychology terms: positive and negative. An interest ^{Principles}
shared by ^{as diverse as Enigma} Bridget Riley ^{in farming, Li cum in Italy the in the 1930's} by Albers, by many abstract artists ^{Yes?}

I'm not one of those
interested in painting Psychology

Do you know

→ Serge Poliakoff P ⑦
Poliakoff:

LPS: No I don't.

JC: Poliakoff in '59 was doing painting almost identical to ^{in terms of inter} ^{locking} yours, in terms of positive/negative concerns, except his surf- ^{forms} ^{aces} were gestural. Not flat. layered. (But definitely positive/negative)

LPS: Where did he live?

JC France, I think

→ Poliakoff is a European
very established artist.

I was intrigued by the parallel...

LPS Many artists were influenced by my work at that time

I would have to see it before I would say its the "same curve". Also in the 60's a bit like the revival today there

were many people ^{were} concerned with abstraction, flattening the picture plane in Europe and the States too. All

over! I want to ask the classic cliché question for Leon Polk Smith: Aranson book, for example, on "The History of Modern

Art", Elsworth Kelly's mentioned about eight times for every Leon Polk Smith mention. Yet I understand you're ^{first} ^{your} dates

are ^{much} earlier than Elsworth Kelly-by ^{knowing} years-especially your plant drawings. How do you feel ^{you} were first- ~~but~~ yet he's

The star?

first: Mr Aranson had seen no more ^{than} 3 or 4 pts. of mine

next: But to accept the praise with out honoring the source makes for an unethical thief.

LPS: I don't blame Elsworth Kelly for accepting all the publicity he got. I was with Galerie Chalette and they were intelligent people

Selling my work enough to support me quite well, ~~when~~ I moved to Long Island. I seldom came into New York. Well, t

Galerie Chalette didn't believe in advertising. Good doctors and good lawyers don't advertise. But I said you need it! You're not promoting my work! I did know they disliked critics, and enjoyed telling me they just threw

out a critic that was in. And they didn't encourage critics to come there at all. So five or six¹ years of my work wasn't written up.

JC: How do you feel about Elsworth Kelly now?

LPS Could I arrive at that in my own way? I can't speak if
I loose my train of thoughts. You're too eager. Rather, Ireland...
^{living on}
~~As~~ I was ^{and there} Leo Castelli is certainly
a very fine promoter and publicist. And he promoted Kelly right
out in front of me! He was a good dealer. But you see Kelly
never once credited my influence! He always denied he was influ-
enced by my work. The first time I heard the word Kelly was
when he came from Europe and I had a telephone call. He says
my name's Elsworth Kelly, you've never heard of me. I've been ^{A.}
studying in Europe and I saw your paintings reproduced in ART D'AUJOURD'
and was influenced by them, as a number of other young artists HUI
were in Paris. Could I come to your studio? Well, I'd been
teaching for 25 years, I was ^{already} interested in students never
private students, always taught in university and ws interest-
ed in young people's work and I said "Of cours". And the first
time he came with Bob Clarke, who later became Robert Indiana,
and Jack Youngerman, and it seems another but I don't know

JC What date was that....?

LPS: When I came back from Paris, I'm sure you can find out.

JC: Roughly?

LPS: Mid Fifties. So Kelly came to my studio with the three of them. ^{then} He came ^{to} a number of little parties; but ^{instead of} ~~instad of~~ he'd sit in front of my paintings like this (^{holding his} ~~hold his~~ head in hands) maybe for twenty minutes, ignoring the party and saying: "God, that's a great painting. ~~I'd~~ ^{I'd} make ^{me} ~~wish~~ ^{wish} I'd done it. And then he said Betty Parson's had offered ~~me~~ ^{him} a show next spring. ¹ month later ^{Elsworth} ~~he~~ said Betty ~~said she's going~~ ^{could} ~~could~~ my show up to fall. 'Cos he had all ^{my} ~~his~~ ideas there and he wanted to get them out as quickly as possible. ~~So~~ ^{almost} did a show ~~right out of my studio~~ based on ideas, colors ^{and} shapes from my studio

JC: I sympathise. A similar story happened with Sol Le Witt. Sol Le Witt was accused of ~~stealing~~ ^{being inspired by} Francois Morellet with almost identical ideas; ~~but~~ ^{but he} promoting them with more energy, ~~hence~~ ^{hence} So fewer people know Morellet than LeWitt. Although if there's any justice I've been seeing a lot more Morellet's around recent-

ly.

Talking about prices a bit. I notice the price of your art ~~and art~~ is about as absurd a pricing system as any range from about \$20,000 to \$150,000; and I'm not familiar with Elsworth Kelly's prices, but I'm pretty sure they're quite abit higher. The man who you say took his first important show direct from your studio. My question is and it jumps back to the beginning of our talk about how you can be seen as one of the neglected grand father of today's younger abstract artists;

Halley, Jeff Koons, Philip Taffe, Haim Steinbach, Peter Schuff

Neo Geo ^{Some of them} ^{Also called} more you're area. Do you know them....

LPS: I don't know of Neo Geo. I don't know any of the names. But I've seen several shows...

JC: I'm neutral. ^{Here neither} t enamoured or supporting them.
I'm just curious—as a social phenomena how do you feel ^{about my own follow}
(Like some more tea James, Bob get some more tea interruption while tea is drunk. "James is a big tea drinker" "Stronger"
Is it okay?") Sorry I'm too eager!
its my stance: eagerness. How do you feel these young artists—
after say two years in the arena are , to use ^{office} jargon, are pretty much up in your kind of ^{the price} Half of yours?

LPS: I have never enquired about their prices. I Didn't even know they were selling. There's a lot about the artworld I've never been interested in, not concerned with..

JC: ^{rough} You're are a practising artist with a great record of shows and sales. Yes?

^{Could you} LPS: Give me the name of some young artist of the Neo Geo who's paintings are selling near a hundred thousand..

JC: I could yes!

LPS: I'd like to have them..

^{Leon} JC: But I prefer not to : now....

Perhaps not painting but sculpture. Jeff Koons ^{for example} ¹⁰
a stainless steel replica of an American kitsch train with ^{the} liquor
real liquor inside, went for ^{about} 80 thousand dollars to Satchi
I think. Peter Halley is

LPS : But that was for a train.!!

But it's not your area, let me go to another ^{question}

LPS: Hold on! Schnabel's another scene...

JC: Prices you want Leon! Prices: Helmut Federle, top price
about 70 grand; Meiser Vaisman - if I'm to believe the lady
at the front desk at Leo Castelli - all sold yesterday at from
35 to 50 thousand and he's thirty, ^{or so} something. Peter Halley
is, ^{Leon} thirty, forty, and boring Taffe is up there too.
It's all a game. I'm just telling you what you've spawned -
not directly of course...

LPS: Castelli has a very fine roster of clients, and Not only
that but it was said thirty years ago, maybe longer, that Cast-
elli could sell anything. One of his artists said, ~~that~~. To
o prove it, I don't know whether it's the one who did the sculpt-
ure of a Coca Cola bottle. I think it was Jasper Johns - and
Castelli sold it immediately.

JC But I don't really want to talk about other people I prefer
to talk about you....

LPS:

I do to. I don't have too much to say about other people.... -

only good artists!

But

JC: Some artists philosophically embrace the young as way of reinventing themselves. Warhol *is a copy* was notorious for embracing young artists, often of different *people* ~~sexes~~ ^{not} but he was very excited ~~to~~ ^{to} the young. Maybe you'd be disparaging about an artist like that.

I mentioned to someone I was going to talk to Leon Polk Smith; and they said you're going to talk with the original not the "neo" nonsense. Not the simulation, not the copies, not the followers. We are in Baudrillard world turned topsy turvy where the original is deliberately played down.

LPS: Well, that doesn't bother me;

I am happy all of

my works are originals..

JC: Wouldn't Peter Halley claim he was original too Leon..?

I don't know his work.

LPS ~~Has he ever had any new ideas?~~ *5*

~~I can't think of a single one. I've been to several of these shows of Neo Geo. And I haven't seen one new idea..~~

JC: I think Peter Halley had maybe ^{just} one new idea! *(laughs)*.

LPS: I don't know ~~any~~, so I can't tell you..

12

JC: Halley's the one who does the texture paint, but instead of giving texture through struggle he puts it on with a roller....

LPS: They've been doing that for thirty years, putting it on with a roller and texture! ~~is~~ that's no new idea. Not even a technical one...

JC Who are you talking about...?

LPS: Who..?

JC Which artist has put texture paint on with roller in a geometric ~~way~~ ^{way} the stuff you use for kitsch restaurants ~~or whatever~~ or whatever. I can't think of anyone ^{Baummeister, Braque} in an organic way. ~~yes...~~

LPS: I'm afraid I can't discuss ^{this} artist. I've never seen any of his work. Nothing I can say about it!

JC ~~My~~ ^{specifically} editor asked me to ask, so I'm asking ~~something~~ ^{different}: work processes. The life of a working artist. You taught for 25 years, the usual complaint about teaching is you don't have enough time to do your own work. Was this true

LPS: ^{live} Always been quite a prolific painter, and when I was teaching fulltime, I did more paintings than most artists painted in New York, who were painting fulltime.

JC You were ~~not~~ ^{said you had no time to work} Not like a Hoffman who couldn't really paint until he was 78, because he had no time...

about 60 yrs. ago

LPS: When I started teaching, I was the only artist I knew that had a master's degree; and many artists at that time hadn't gone to college. Sometimes ^{they} look down their nose at me, because

I was always interested in knowledge - a curiosity about everything.

135

JC Are you an avid reader?

Yes,

LPS: Science I read a lot. Very interested in science, psychology; not too much philosophy. And practically no fiction.

JC What kind of science for example...

I was particularly interested in ^{Particularly} geology, as I came from Oklahoma. Also plant and animal life as it evolved. That's the basis of interest in that sort of science. De Jarden ⁱⁿ ~~finally~~ comes to ^{to mind} one sentence, - and any book worth remembering you're very ~~fortunate~~ and he said perhaps mind has always been in matter. That answered so many questions for me. Levitated me! ~~I could almost...~~ Several sentences in my life have done that to me...

JC As a sentence collector myself I sympathise.

When.

... Did you read that? 1940

CIRCA

one is fortunate if one great revealing sentence is found in reading a book -

De Jardin

LPS: I read ~~the~~ 1. 1940.

Returning to T.M.O

JC: ~~fitting the fashion scene again~~

14

~~because of the importance~~. Bear with me. The four works you have in the De Laurenti show, the last works, all '87 I believe, ~~which are~~ ^{and} monochrome panels, butting edge to edge, with a single fluorescent light on the floor, is this a homage to Dan Flavin, plus ~~whatever~~ say Peter Halley. Why the light on the floor? Never have I seen Leon Polk Smith's with lights on the floor, illuminating the painting from ~~the floor~~. Except ~~these~~ in 1987. Where does this come from?

LPS: I've been using them ever since I moved here about 10 years. they're in my studio now.... *this particular lighting is not part of my art but only a special means of seeing it.*

JC You mean you've had lights on the floor to illuminate works since when?...

LPS: Ten years!

Cont

By the way

and evolving

LPS: It takes a strong creative mind to keep working in an abstract manner. ~~and~~ Very few have it. I suppose I've worked in an abstract manner much longer than anyone. I know, ~~that's~~ ^{who} ~~what happens to people who paint abstractly~~ ^{People give up abstract art!} I used to talk with E. E. Cummings in the park, and he suggested to me abstract art was something ~~you go~~ ^{he went} through in one year... He was painting flowers still life ~~stuff~~

JC: How do you feel the language of abstract art, in a ~~superficial way is very clear, and it needs~~ ^{under-} ~~a special reading to~~ ^{stand.} tell the difference between Belotowsky say, or a Mondrian. Thousands of ~~people~~ ^{artists} paint stripes for example?

E.E. Cummings complaint might be stripes are not as rich as the world of flowers?

LPS: I don't know ~~he~~ ^{whether he} complained but he went through it!

JC: Isn't the minuted ~~of concerns~~ ^{abstract} so specialised it takes a very ~~particular~~ understanding ...?

LPS: You can say that about anything. Say it about a diamond, ^{an acorn!} ~~my work is abstract~~ ^{a termite.} ~~not an abstraction.~~

JC: ~~Not particularly, about abstract painting?~~
How many ways can you paint a stripe?

LPS How many ways can you paint a tree? ^{a person?} ^{a sunset?}

JC: A lot more ways than you can a stripe I suspect...

LPS: All stripes are not straight. ^{nor straight out.}

I enjoyed your "5 Decades" very much ~~but~~

(16)

JC: One device you use worries me: why the black wood around as a kind of underlining of your image. I'm looking at one in your studio ^{now} projecting three-dimensionally in front of the canvas. ~~It~~ ^{it} extends about 3 inches beyond the canvas. ~~It~~ painted black! ^{The wooden piece}

wooden piece

LPS: People asked when I first started using the wooden pieces. In painting: How did I get the idea? Well, for a month I said I wish I knew. I don't know where it came from. Then I was looking through some ^{of my} collages, and found that I'd translated a pencil line I'd been using for 20 years into the wooden piece. ~~It~~ ^{doesn't}

~~know where it came from. In reference to your three dimensional~~ ^{idea --- the painting is already on a three dimensional stretcher.}

JC: Leon you haven't answered my question, ~~It~~ ^{we} have translated a pencil line into a wooden line ~~and~~ ^{an} ~~it~~ ^{is} not necessarily a successful device

LPS: It's not a device! Would you call a right-angle ^{or} and a curve a device....!

JC: Everything's a device of course. ^{Some work, some don't!}

LPS: ^{With} ~~then~~ the pencil line: ^{my} ~~the~~ unconscious, ^{it} ~~we~~ translated ~~it~~ ^{it}

into the wooden piece, I didn't recognise its source.


~~I~~: Okay, I'm not going to tell you it works And I'm not ^{sure as have} going to tell you whether it doesn't work. What can I do about your appreciation? I have nothing to do with that. If you can't see it works then you ~~can't see~~ ^{have a problem}

JC: ~~Sorry~~ Leon, the unhappiest hybrid for me is the painting and relief. ^{(It's the old theatricality problem Michael Fried always talked about).}

Let us not be too old fashioned!
He insists they are paintings

Speaking of three dimensional painting --- in Studio piece at MOMA, some work is painted 4 ft. from wall

Curiosity prompted my question why after a lifetime of flat paintings...

LPS : Listen my dear man any painting is a relief in that sense! 

~~Oh~~ I don't want to talk to you about it, if you don't see it, you don't see it. Doesn't anger me you can't see it. ~~They~~ ^{There} have been great historians, curators, and young people - all and they're ^{liked} ~~so crazy about it~~ ^{about it} ~~of these~~. But you don't understand? [?]

Now, come James!

JC: I'm sure I have gaps in my understanding.

LPS: Well, it's up to you to do something about it. If you're interested enough you'll find out for yourself (laughs)

JC: What makes a good painting for you then? What's a good Leon Polk Smith? Do you reject paintings? What criteria? ^{do you have?}

LPS: If I have strong feelings that it works well I keep it. If not I destroy it. And in my lifetime I think I have only destroyed fifteen or twenty paintings, ~~in my life~~. And in the last thirty or forty years I don't think I've destroyed any..

JC: What about the relationship between drawing and painting? Do you draw for paintings?

LPS: No! I have lots of drawings, lots of collages (my collages are not so well-known, first done in 1939, and have done collages every year since - and collages are a different world from painting, and I never did a painting from a collage) And I don't do paintings from drawings. Usually the drawing I do on the canvas is the original. Now after I do a painting, I may do variations on that in drawings but the drawings are more apt to follow the paintings.

JC: If I didn't like the black wood. I loved your new prints by the way. Marvellous!

LPS: Aren't they beautiful? I'm not talking about my work. I'm talking about the printer from ^{Freiburg} ~~Freiburg~~ ^{W. Germany}

JC: What about delegation? At the age of 81 - in remarkable condition I should say - . I note the trampoline in your studio, and your strong interest in nuatrition - are you doing all your paintings yourself...?

LPS: Nobody in this world, nor out of this world, has done a painting for me! I've done all of them myself. Bob ^{Jamieson} stretches the canvas, he does everything, but he doesn't do my painting..

JC : He makes a good pot of tea as well. But he doesn't actually apply the color or anything like that. Do you size the canvas yourself...

LPS: No I never sized a canvas in my life.

JC You always painted in oils?

LPS: Where did you get this information?

JC: From your Five Decades show at De Laurenti. Am I wrong?

LPS: Yes, you're wrong.

JC: I'm sorry I assumed they were all oil. Most were..

LPS There was a time when I stopped painting in oil. Well, in the late 60's I did a few painting in acrylics and I liked the results . In fact I use exactly the same technique ~~I could~~ ^{the oils from the acrylics} ~~of the oils from the acrylics~~ today I can't tell them apart except
 ~~by the date.~~ ^{by the date.}
 ~~by the date.~~ ^{by the date.}

JC: I can. By the smell..

LPS: Anyhow I'm talking more about the eye than the nose (laughs)
I'm talking about the look.

JC You don't agree with a contemporary artist Sandro Chia that he ~~... rather~~ use acrylic because it leaves no rich history of the mark underneath, whereas oil does?

LPS : My kind of painting has nothing to do with that! I don't care about how other people think!

I do care, but I don't arrive at ~~my~~ richness in his manner...

JC: Mondrian surfaces were very rich weren't they? Every block of color ~~...~~ twitching with rich paint..

LPS: I've always used the very finest art materials; even when I didn't know where the next meal was coming from. A loaf of bread, a ~~glass~~^{jar} of milk for a few days, but I'd save my money to buy good art materials. The best I can get! And to this day I've used pigment the way it comes from the tube or the jar. When I was using oils I used only Winsor and Newton. Today I still have maybe a thousand dollars worth of Winsor and Newton oils...*which I don't use.*

JC: Does Bob mix them for you...?

LPS: I told you I paint directly from the tube - or the jar. And now you ask me if I mix them or Bob mixes them. Nobody mixes them!

JC I didn't ~~hear you say you~~ ^{understand when I said you} painted directly from the tube, I'm sorry!...

LPS: Tubes or jars I said. I use purest pigment the way it comes from the tube or the jar! And I don't mix them neither does anyone else mix them for me...

JC What I meant Leon was with jars of color. people mix medium with them and some artist use electrical paint mixers to expedite the process.

20

LPS: I ^{don't} paint with a sponge or roller. I ^{don't} need that. Sponges, rollers - or ~~even~~ feet - I don't care to use. ^{ham}
.... (laughs).

JC: I'm only asking (laughing)

LPS: And I'm ^{only} telling! You don't like my answer?..

JC: You're hammering me with these aggressive responses!..

LPS: These are aggressive questions. ^{Jama} Like begets like!..

JC: I'm fascinated by every aspect of the artworld. You, your life, your philosophy, the way you paint. I'm prodding you to reveal a ~~bit~~ more!..

LPS: You don't like what I'm saying...?

Yes.

JC: I love what you're saying..

LPS: Then what are you complaining about?..

JC: I'm not complaining. I'm just finding it a bit hard going Leon. To continue the joust. Do you care where your paintings go

end up
~~like a Clifford Still was supposed to? care about~~

LPS: ~~I think~~ ^{do!} Anyone who said it doesn't matter would be a liar. And I ^{do!} ~~Never~~ say it doesn't matter. Every artist would like his work to be where the greatest number who appreciate that work would see it. ~~But is a particular museum and put proportionately. I'd say there are more people in Germany who've followed my work over the last 25 years. I never had a dealer there from the late 60's on.~~

(The Germans have nothing for ex-artists like me)

JC: Couple more questions and finito. Being in Manhattan, in a new Yuppy world of the wealthy and the reactionary? Are you threatened ~~by this~~?

LPS: ~~It~~ ^Affects me not at all. I've been in New York since 1936, and loved New York immediately. I felt at home here! As I did in Oklahoma. I feel at home wherever I go, so far as I know New York City's is the only city I can live in - or in the country. It's either New York or in the country I love nature! and I don't care where the country is

JC: ~~Boundaries to the country?~~ ... What do you mean "nature"?

LPS: ~~As the~~ Animals, birds, insects, trees, flowers, and shrubs. Everything you find in the country.

JC: One final question, a little indiscrete but forgive me, I have to ask? Last one! You live with a man, who is your assistant ~~a~~ the charming Bob, tea-maker extraordinaire - working for you. Do you think members of minorities - and we are all members of a very different minorities have any more particular sensitivity than those who are not? Do ^{you} ~~you think this helps~~ ^{prolong} over a life-time the kind of sensitivity you have. What about the ~~alternative~~ ^{alternative} ~~raising~~ ^{raising} of the family ~~with~~ ^{with} children for example? (~~you can raise this question if you want~~)

LPS: Well, I have nothing against that question whatsoever ~~because~~

Everyone is in a minority. I'm trying to think how I feel about family. I grew up in a large family, nine children. Father and mother made eleven. I never felt I needed family after that. ~~And I know of very few creative people who are good family~~

JC: Couple more questions and finito. Being in Manhattan, in a new Yuppy world of the wealthy and the reactionary? Are you threatened ~~by it~~?

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JC: ~~Don't have too little children, son...~~ What do you mean "nature" ?

LPS: ~~Are the~~ Animals, birds, insects, trees, flowers, and shrubs. Everything you find in the country.

JC: One final question, a little indiscrete, but forgive me, I have to ask? Last one! You live with a ^{companion} ~~man~~, who is your assistant - the charming Bob, ^{Jameson} tea-maker extraordinaire - working for you. Do you think members of minorities - and we are all members of a very different minorities have any more particular sensitivity than those who are not? Do ^{you} ~~you think this helps~~ ^{help} prolong over a life-time the kind of sensitivity you have. What about the ~~alternative nurturing of the family~~ ~~children for example?~~ ~~(You can nurture into adulthood if you want)~~

LPS: Well. I have nothing against that question whatsoever ~~responses~~

Everyone is in a minority. I'm trying to think how I feel about family. I grew up in a large family, nine children. Father and mother made eleven, I never felt I needed family after that. ~~And I know of very few creative people who are good family~~

~~MADE~~ Of all the artist family people I know, I can count the successful ones, on very few fingers. Milton Avery was one. He and his wife Sally were both painters, and they ^{had} one child and she ^{is} a painter. At one time we were very close friends, and all three of them would be painting, each at an easel. And the Avery family was a very successful family...

JC: You've chosen then to live alone - or familyless - ~~because~~ ^{is} ~~for you~~ your work ~~and~~ your family? ~~It's a choice.~~

LPS: I didn't want another family, I'd grown out of one and I never felt the need for another. I felt another family would keep me from doing what I wanted to do creatively in life.

JC: Very touching. And a really last question about age. You're 81 - and I don't believe it - and a man who is a living example of ~~the~~ mental processes not deteriorating with age - and ~~you~~ ^{are} ~~more than capable~~ ^{only sometimes} capable of cogent, nay brilliant, aggressive discourse at an advanced age. How do you feel as an artist at 81 about the present, and the future?

LPS: I feel the same as 31, 41, 51, 61, 71! And about the ^{MIND} ~~brain~~ and the body. If you stop using ^{them} ~~your~~ ^{if you} ~~brain~~ ^{don't} give ^{them} proper nourishment - and ~~pretty much the same~~ ^{about} ~~the body~~ ^{THEY} ~~starts~~ deteriorating ~~from~~ ^{only}. And that's about all I want to say.

Interview by James Collins with LEON POLK
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