

## John Armleder: Slightly Transformed or Used Verbatim

BY JOE FYFE

Over the last 40 years, John Armleder has been active in an expansive field, cross-pollinating the practices of painting, sculpture, design, performance, found-object assemblage, installation and curating. He seems intent on relieving much of 20th-century abstraction of its history and context in order to manufacture paintings and arrange environments that have an uninflected decorative functionalism. Armleder has cited Erik Satie's idea of "furniture music"—compositions that function as background music, not demanding all of the audience's attention—and has attempted to literalize it in his own works, which achieve a degree of

contentlessness. Whether made of poured acrylic on canvas or stenciled on the wall, his paintings would not look out of place in (admittedly, eccentric) window displays or furniture stores.

Armleder (b. 1948) is fundamentally an Apollonian figure with egalitarian ideals: he sees himself as more like other people than not (as good a definition as any of a postmodern artist) and claims to be at the service of the viewer. Taken at face value, this is a common enough claim among artists, but in Armleder's case accommodation extends beyond the audience. One of his longtime dealers, Susanna Kulli, recently told me that the artist



*Two richly stocked exhibitions surveyed the dense, sometimes involuted, yet unfailingly high-spirited work of this durable Swiss artist.*

treats everyone involved with his exhibitions and installations with exceptional graciousness, no matter what their position. (I received thorough and prompt responses from Armleder to the questions I e-mailed in the course of completing this article.)

In this light, it may be relevant to note that Armleder comes from several generations of Geneva hoteliers. That background is perhaps reflected in his cordiality as well as in the crisp tidiness of his output, which keeps the pull of polymorphous chaos in check. His installations can be intensely visual to the point of optical assault, yet they are unerringly formal and

composed, with the more perverse elements quietly enfolded. He is the most respectful of antitraditionalists, a position that is consistent with his artistic persona as evidenced in many photographs of Armleder in

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*View of John Armleder's Universal Mirror Balls (center), 1995/2006, with Rhizostomeae, 2005, and Semaestomeae V, 2002, front to back on left wall; pink rat wallpaper and three paintings from 2006 on right wall. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.*

**Armleder disavows simple artistic progress, often returning to his own early motifs and readily reusing stylistic tropes from modernism.**

performance or posed beside one of his works. Wearing business attire or a tuxedo, with his long hair braided and fingers entwined at his waist, he suggests an inordinately wise and calmly subversive concierge or maître d', a willing guide to new perspectives.

Armleder's professional history begins with the 1969 birth of Ecart, a Zen-influenced Fluxus-type group that he founded in Geneva with Patrick Lucchini, Claude Rychner and other boyhood chums. The members of Ecart (a French word meaning "discrepancy" or "gap," with *mettre à l'écart* signifying to put aside or sweep away) collaborated on performances, artists' editions and Galerie Ecart, which developed into one of the most important alternative spaces in Europe during the 1970s. In an early solo work, Armleder served tea, an activity that was also an Ecart group ritual, at the 1975 Paris Biennial. Ecart eventually became a one-person project, and Armleder turned it into a bookshop, then a publishing house and, ultimately, a curatorial project that continues to this day, including a yearly appearance at the Art Basel fair.

Ecart was also a pioneer in the sale of punk rock records, and one can see the influence of this contra-hippie esthetic in Armleder's installations of the mid-1970s to the early '80s: visual situations in which flung paint was combined with simply constructed, geometrically shaped reliefs on the floor and/or collections of rectangular emblems that were painted directly on dirty gallery walls. These initial works irreverently drew upon the Suprematism- and Bauhaus-influenced International Style that was by then approaching banality in Switzerland (from abstract paintings by artists such as Max Bill to that country's graphic design and architecture). They also point to Armleder's disavowal of artistic progress. He often returns to early motifs in his own art, and he readily reuses stylistic tropes from the past, particularly from the history of modernism.

Through Ecart's activities, Armleder was able to meet many of Europe's

important artists, and it is notable that, thanks to fellow Swiss artist Olivier Mosset, he encountered the other influential members of BMPT. Based mostly in France, BMPT—Daniel Buren, Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni—was a group of painters who practiced a studied esthetic indifference, which was manifested in their reduction of abstraction to mechanical formalities. They used one color per year (Parmentier) or one mark, such as stripes (Buren) or a single regimentally repeated brush mark (Toroni), or pursued a general impersonality through various monochrome formats (Mosset). This bedrock formalism appears, in retrospect, to have been of utmost importance to Armleder's activity, which has consistently been centered on the reduction or wholesale removal of received meanings from cultural and manufactured objects.

Armleder first became widely known in 1980, with a one-person exhibition at the Basel Kunstmuseum. The show was installed in the prints and drawings galleries, but extended beyond works on paper to include sculpture, assemblage, on-site interventions and wall paintings. He went on to represent Switzerland in the Venice Biennale of 1986. Armleder spent considerable time in New York during the 1980s and was considered by some a representative of "Neo-Geo"—a label applied to a theory-based, neo-constructivist hybrid movement—for artworks that combined used furniture and geometric abstract paintings, or furniture combined with objects such as musical instruments or household appliances, pieces that he called "furniture sculpture." In the course of that decade, too, Armleder developed close relationships with many New York artists, including Lawrence Weiner, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Peter Halley and Steven Parrino. Store-bought objects as seen in works by Steinbach and Koons, the physically charged abstract paintings of Parrino and Halley, and Weiner's use of sentence fragments are all elements that can be found in Armleder's work as well.

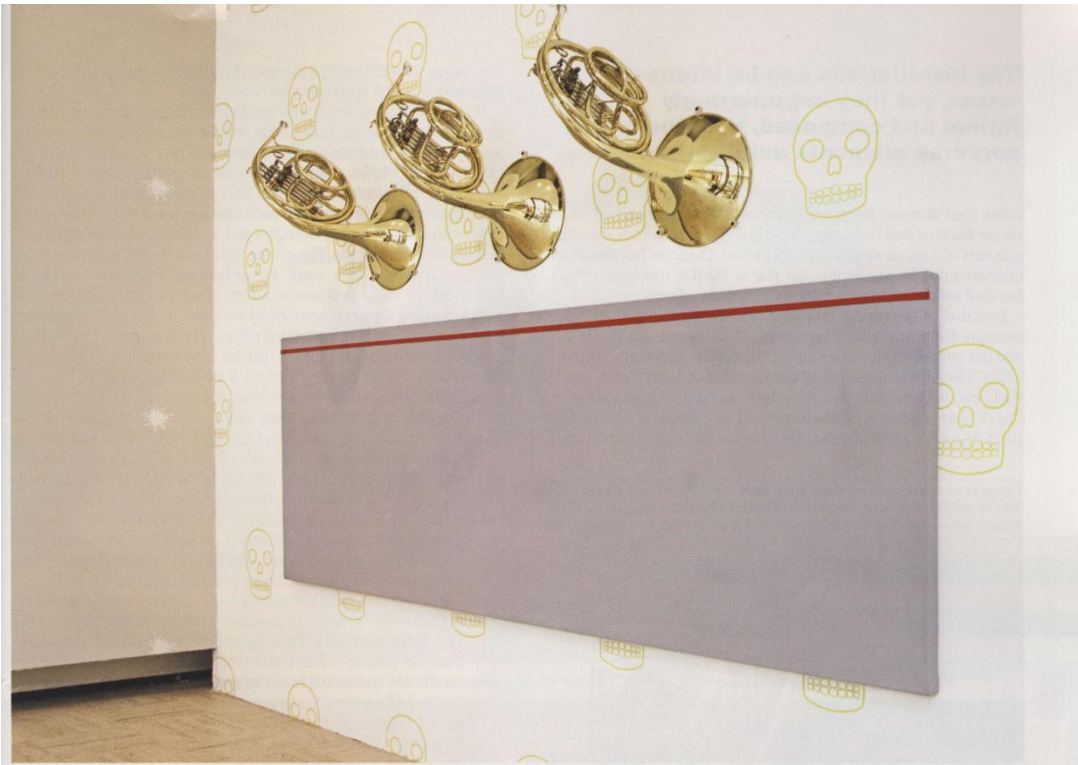
The intermingling of fine art, high design, kitsch, popular culture and mass-produced merchandise in Armleder's art is, of course, an expansion of the Duchampian concept of the readymade. In a lecture presented in New York last November, the philosopher Alain Badiou remarked that the readymade "exposes the choice of choice," and that the artist is "not doing, but acting, that it is not about realization." This fittingly describes Armleder's praxis: he makes a lot of choices and distinguishes that activity from self-referential artistic creation. Still, his output cannot be considered an ironic critique of culture. Armleder is a pragmatic utopian who accepts galleries and art fairs as givens, and whose aim is to bring about an environment in which the viewer may be free to pursue his or her own associations.

**A**rmleder's work has been uncommonly accessible to American audiences thanks to two recent exhibitions, a major survey at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University called "Too Much Is Not Enough" and a more focused show, "About Nothing: Works on Paper 1962-2007," which comprised over 500 drawings, books and wallpapers at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. The latter show established that drawing, for Armleder, arises from a combination of artifact and material-based mark, and is encyclopedic in reach.

The Philadelphia exhibition revealed that Armleder's earliest works on paper, done with colored pencil in the 1960s, are almost hallucinogenic interior explorations that are faintly imagistic. He subsequently progressed toward a kind of Suprematism-inflected abstraction, utilizing circles, rectangles, bar shapes, etc. In an installation supervised by the

Untitled (Furniture Sculpture), 1986, painted wall, chairs, mixed mediums on canvas. Photo Joe Fyfe.





Untitled (Furniture Sculpture 159), 1986, acrylic on canvas and three French horns. Naumann Family collection, New York.

artist, drawings were hung in close rows at viewing height as well as in a densely packed quasi-salon style. One of the latter groups took up most of the surface of one very high wall. Ranging in size from a small card to a poster, all were framed and had been executed on used and found paper, including napkins, cardboard, tissue, manila envelopes and wrapping paper. The marks were made with offset printing, gouache, melted plastic, aluminum spray lacquer, ink stamps and frottage. The Philadelphia exhibition also included a few examples of Armleder's multiple objects, prints, books, recordings and wallpapers.

Armleder's first comprehensive exhibition in the U.S. filled the Rose Art Museum, a 1961 building that sits on a rise on the western edge of the Brandeis campus. With its cast-concrete shell, steel and glass facade, and flower-lined front walk and landing, the museum setting seemed somehow typically Swiss: elegantly modernist, yet a little homey. On the right side, a banner announced the exhibition, titled "Too Much Is Not Enough." Other titles that Armleder has used for exhibitions include "At Any Speed," "No Pain, Just Gain" and "Enter at Your Own Risk"—all familiar catchphrases, slightly transformed or used verbatim.

Every wall in the museum had been repainted under the artist's direction, solid or striped, and many bore repeated images created with stencils. Flooded with natural light, the entrance-level gallery featured a number of furniture sculptures, most from the 1980s. *Untitled (Furniture Sculpture 159)*, 1986, includes a horizontal acrylic painting in gray monochrome with a red stripe near the canvas's upper edge, plus three French horns, their openings flush with the wall and mouthpieces tilted

to the left, mounted above. It was installed on a cream-colored wall that bore stenciled renderings of a skull derived from Olmec art. Across the stairwell, a long white wall was emblazoned with stenciled reiterations of a fuchsia-colored, cartoonish painterly splash. Here, too, was the only recent work on the entrance level, *AH (ARA ARRAC TT) Furniture Sculpture* (2006), consisting of two abutted paintings with colorful vertical bands ("In the manner of Gene Davis," Armleder commented in an e-mail) fronted by a red couch and a pair of white lamps by the contemporary Swiss designer Alfredo Häberli.

Several features of the Armleder survey seem to have been designed to be congruent with details of the museum interior. *Untitled (Furniture Sculpture)*, 1986, consists of a vertical white canvas with several circles drawn in china ink and acrylic. On either side, mounted on the wall (this time painted in an array of blue and white diagonal stripes) with the seats facing out, are two chrome and leather chairs, their arms, backs and legs formed in an extended half-circle of metal. Nearby stood two of the museum's own chairs of leather, wood and metal, equal in size to the ones in Armleder's piece, and with arms and backs making a half-circle. Similar visual rhymes continued throughout the building. (How intentional they were seemed to fall in a gray area between choice and chance, a common occurrence in the artist's work.)

In the well of the stairway leading down to a pool and fountain was Armleder's *Universal Mirror Balls* (1995/2006), 10 slowly turning, motorized disco balls suspended in two rows over the shallow rectangle of

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water, their mirrored facets reflecting the 20 spotlights trained on them. On the flanking wall was a repeated motif, stenciled in pink, showing the side view of a rat arrested in forward motion. The artist has mentioned in interviews that he was born in the Year of the Rat; this image, which he has used before, might be considered a signature of sorts.

Installed on the wall of rats were several "pour" paintings, another example from Armleder's repertoire of borrowed motifs. He began making poured works, often on-site and with assistants, in the late 1970s. They are reminiscent of the canvases of Larry Poons and Morris Louis, influences he acknowledges, as he does elements of John Cage's chance processes. These vertical compositions feature diluted paint in a wide array of colors that runs in skeins down the length of

*Foreground to background, Dunn-Rites, 2004, tractor tires and plants; Mando Tiki VI, 2007, scaffolding installation; Untitled (Furniture Sculpture), 1999, kitchen tables and fluorescent tubes on wall; and untitled wall painting, 1997.*



the canvas. Newer versions incorporate glass, mirror chips, and even miniature toys and other party favors.

Also downstairs was a wall with striated samplings of contact paper that included a brick pattern, faux-marble, wood-grain, gold and blue gingham. Nearby was *Semaeostomeae* (2002), a series of evenly spaced images of a mushroom-cap jellyfish, stenciled in violet on a white wall and partially overlaid with *Rhizostomeae* (2005), floor-to-ceiling rows of acrylic mirrored domes. The title refers to a particular species of edible jellyfish that has been used in Chinese medicine and is distinguished by eight arms that terminate in mouths. The rowing instructor shared by Armleder and his Ecart friends in their youth, Pierre Laurent, was known as "the jellyfish," but the image may also be a form of self-portrait: many arms and mouths feeding a central brain could be a way of describing Armleder's use of assistants and the resulting polyphonic discourse. (I brought up this idea to the artist, who replied that his imagery may function as secret signals to the "Ecart people . . . but I hope that any 'user' of my works would attach their own stories, meanings and so on . . .")

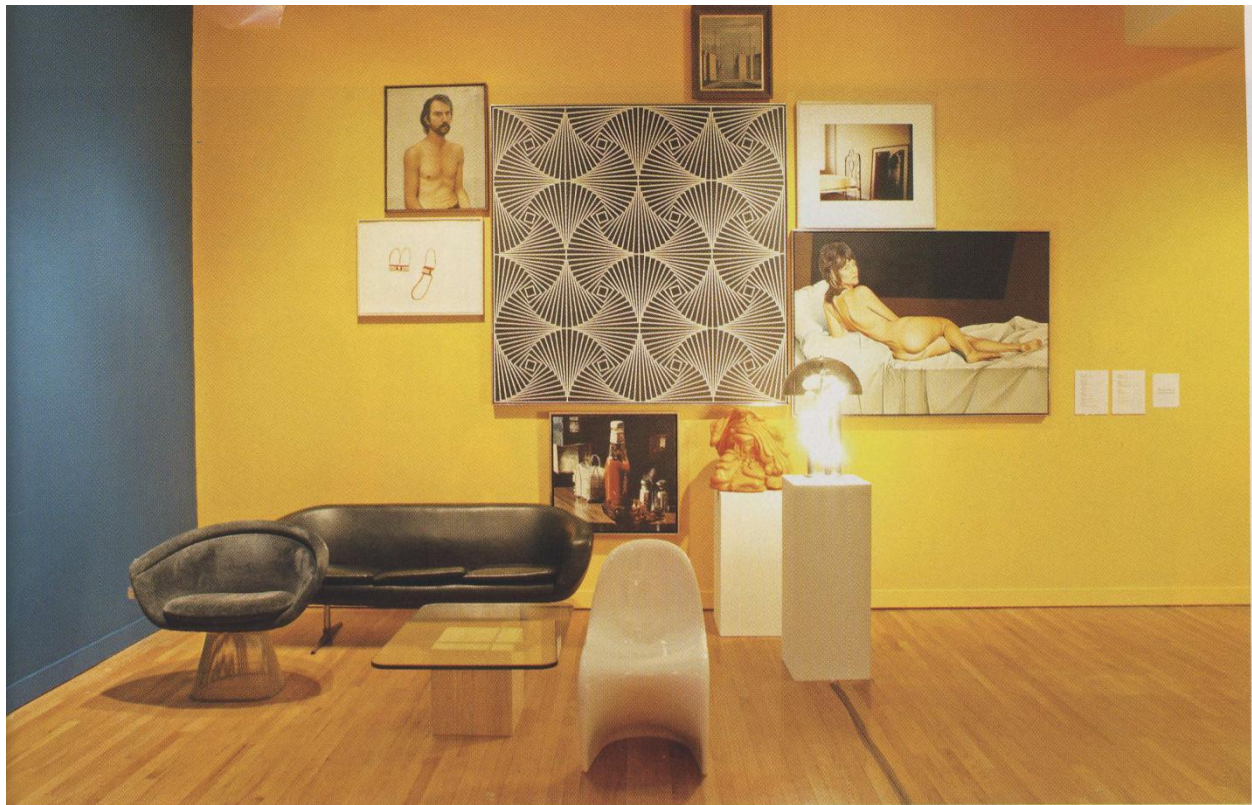
Still another area of the museum's lower floor featured the roomlike installation *Ne dites pas non!* (Don't Say No!), 1986/2007, an assemblage of vintage '60s furniture borrowed from a local collector displayed with arrangements of seven works of art on each of two facing walls. For this work, exhibition curator Raphaela Platow and assistant curator Adelina Jedrzejczak were invited to choose the works from the museum's permanent collection. An Alex Katz painting, a Cindy Sherman photograph, a drawing by Rona Pondick and other pieces were bunched in a perfunctory salon-style hanging.

In a passage that connects a later addition to the museum's original building, Armleder installed a number of tractor tires filled with flowering plants. These "planters" were placed at sporadic intervals, passing before a glass wall that opened to the greenery outside and continuing into a large new gallery. On view here was *Untitled (Furniture Sculpture)*, 1999, an assemblage of Formica-topped kitchen tables, their feet resting on a boldly striped wall, their projecting tops lit from behind by fluorescent lights. Nearby was a large temporary scaffolding, based on El Lissitzky's famous design for a rostrum for Lenin, which viewers were permitted to climb. It was adorned with fresh and artificial flowers, Hawaiian party decorations and television monitors broadcasting a number of B movies rented locally, which included fascinating footage from an outer-space film with semi-nude men and women in a garden full of carved-rock furniture. At the foot of this structure and in the immediate vicinity were neat piles of gravel, bricks, coal, sand and books. The books ranged from old best-sellers by Jacqueline Susann to economics textbooks, diet guides, a soap-opera yearbook and an Iris Murdoch novel, underlining the equivalent materiality—raw and cultural—that is part of Armleder's "message."

Another scaffold, not viewer-accessible, was similarly festooned and had a CD player from which floated selections of Hawaiian lounge music and snatches of organ music, mostly Muzak favorites like "Telstar." Surrounding walls were covered in stencils and paintings on canvas. One had stacked rows of colorful neon tubes in concentric circles, and another carried larger-than-life-size images of the human brain, a good symbol, I thought, of the general ambience: a kind of friendly mind massage.

**A**rmleder no longer maintains a traditional studio. He sometimes contracts out certain pieces for manufacture, but mainly he works within the spaces of art fairs, galleries and museums, relying on assistants or staff provided at the site where an exhibition is scheduled. He allows the circumstances of a given situation—from the local availability of merchandise and materials to the moods and tastes of the collaborators involved—to largely

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above and below, views of *Ne dites pas non! (Don't Say No!)*, 1986/2007, artworks from the Rose Art Museum's permanent collection and vintage furniture.



## Armleder

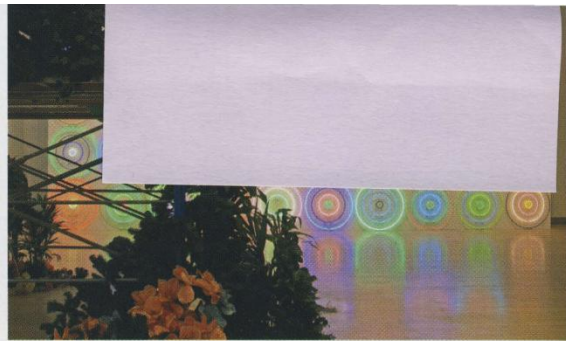
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determine how an exhibition will turn out. In his words, "My shows are not just my shows."

Still, Armleder's own conceptual bent can be detected in his enthusiastic characterization of our contemporary cultural experience as a "pudding overdose," meaning that high and low culture are undifferentiated today. In an interview occasioned by a 1998 exhibition at Kulli's Zurich gallery, Armleder talked about his interest in B movies, low-budget Hollywood films that filled out double features and typically were made with second-tier actors and a repurposed set. "That's my little theory," Armleder offered, "that we are in a B-movie situation, culturally speaking. We have inherited this set, which is the knowledge, the frame, the references of a culture, which went through a whole span of time and experiences, and we use it for something completely different."

As I retraced my steps through the Rose exhibition, I found myself thinking of the poet John Ashbery and the composer Robert Ashley. Ashley writes operas that utilize voice, orchestra and electronic sound, and many of his narratives are drawn from vernacular sources. For example, *e/Ll Aficionado* (1993) combines the language of the espionage novel with that of personal dating ads. Ashley, who conceives his operas with TV broadcast in mind, has said that he watches several hours of television every day. In "The Future of Music," a lecture given at the University of California at San Diego in 2000 and available online, Ashley says, "Music is a commodity, like hamburgers, automobiles, oil, grain, currency and under-paid labor." He seems to be describing music as being enmeshed in an undifferentiated contemporary context—rather like Armleder's "pudding."

Ashbery, arguably the greatest living American poet, begins one poem with the discount store come-on, "Attention shoppers." Many of his poems borrow from commercial culture and re-create the tex-



Mando Tiki VI (foreground) and Voltes II (background), 2003, neon wall installation.

tures of contemporary life. Armleder, Ashley and Ashbery partake of the same pudding environment of mass and high culture, and transform it through an enlivened detachment, a kind of impersonality. The effect of their works is of drifting through the present in a state of almost narcotized wonder. In that same lecture, Ashley describes music as an irrational, sensual pleasure. I would venture that Ashbery perceives poetry, and Armleder art, in exactly the same way. □

*"John Armleder: About Nothing: Works on Paper 1962-2007" opened at the Kunsthalle Zurich [Nov. 13, 2004-Jan. 9, 2005] before traveling to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia [Sept. 9-Dec. 17, 2006]. "John Armleder: Too Much Is Not Enough" was on view at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass. [Apr. 26-July 30, 2007], after having debuted at the Kunstverein Hannover [Nov. 25, 2006-Jan. 28, 2007]. Armleder and Olivier Mosset are collaborating on an exhibition for the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis [May 9-Aug. 3]. Armleder has upcoming shows at Galerie Andrea Caratsch, Zurich [June 1-July 25], and Simon Lee Gallery, London [June-August].*

Author: Joe Fyfe is a Brooklyn-based painter.

## Greenwold

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*Lucy* (2004) is typical of later works in that, however mysterious the relationship among the figures, they seem more relaxed about it than before. Here Lucy sits graciously, this time in pants and a shirt, on a sofa. The painting feels larger than its 9½ inches square, partly because Greenwold's head materializes gigantically, spectrally, like that of the Wizard of Oz, in the lamplight. A man-headed lizard stands on the floor between Greenwold and Lucy—and these three characters are triangulated as well in a painting from the previous year, *Why Not Say What Happened* (a line from Robert Lowell's "Epilogue," from *Day by Day*, 1977). One speculates, a little uncomfortably, about the lizard-man, about the nature of the ties among the three, about what it all might imply.

Visual quotations abound in Greenwold's work. There are the overhead abstractions—after Close, Siena, Sol LeWitt, etc.—and the recognizable people, who are also quotations of a sort. Greenwold cites his own art. In *You Must Change Your Life* (2001-02), a woman is stabbing a man in the neck in an apparition at the top, a reversal of the stabbing of a woman by a man in *Sewing Room (For Barbara)*, 1975-79, which caused outrage among some feminist critics at the time it was made. The boy aiming a gun at his fractious parents in *The Broken Home* (1983-84) is reincarnated as a young girl holding a hammer in *All Joy Gone (For Marvin)*, 2000-01, again with what seem to be culpable parents (as in *The Need to Understand*, Greenwold is here levitating, half-naked; his robe opens to reveal his genitals). Greenwold quotes extensively from art history, casting himself, for example, as the *Portrait of a Man*, Jan van Eyck's (likely) self-portrait, in *The Excited Self* (2005-06), where he has wrapped a red towel around his head like a turban and stands with his eyes closed, as if dreaming. Behind him, a vase disgorges an allusive bouquet, quoting, among others, Charles Burchfield.

The woman with the grown man in her lap in the foreground of *You Must Change Your Life* echoes the famous Avignon Pietà; his rigor mortis resembles that of Christ in Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*. The extraordinary glass house is like the modernist structures of Philip Johnson and Mies van der Rohe. With its compounded transparencies and reflections, it is a fitting metaphor for the projections and fantasies of familial drama. The lead player, Greenwold, stands naked and exposed in the bedroom. ("Here there is no place/that does not see you. You must change your life"—Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo.") Blunt in his treatment of others, Greenwold is even more unforgiving in his self-portrayals, in which he might be, as here, naked. He is both vulnerable and, somehow, culpable. Looking directly out toward the viewer, he seems more responsible for events than the others in the painting. He seems to possess a more complete consciousness of the situation—and though he has, as its inventor, generated it, he seems helpless to control it.

All of this adds up to an artist with a tendency toward overdetermination, be it visual or psychological. For the catalogue, Greenwold selected a group of quotations that, in the layout, are superimposed over photos of his studio walls, hung cheek by jowl with drawings and, on small squares of paper, possible titles and more quotations—any one of which could serve as an epigraph to this article. "To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth" (Nabokov). "The secret of the creative life is often to feel at ease with your own embarrassment" (Paul Schrader). "When you're working with psycho-sexual anxiety, you never run out of material" (David Antrim). The catalogue layout of quotes upon quotes is apt. And one might argue that, changed into the density of tiny painted marks, the overdetermination of Greenwold's work is molecular. His paintings leave us with a feeling of compressed urgency as, self-lacerating and perversely gregarious, they communicate their obscure and intimate secrets. □

*"Mark Greenwold: A Moment of True Feeling" was on view at DC Moore Gallery, New York [Oct. 10-Nov. 10, 2007].*