Jacci Den Hartog Interview with Adam Ross, June 2010

Adam Ross: I have known your work for many years, going back to at least 1993 when I first saw it at the now defunct Sue Spaid Gallery in Los Angeles. The one constant in your work that has persisted, in my view, is this dialectic you have with the idea of landscape, and in particular, the western North American landscape. Can you speak to this?

Jacci Den Hartog: Landscape for me is a really big idea encompassing art, literature, gardens, films, wild spaces and all of the complexities and histories of all of those. The Western North American Landscape for me is foremost a place, some of which is quite familiar and for which I hold much affection. However, it is also a vast screen, willing to receive every kind of cultural projection and idea, from Westerns to Earthworks, to power struggles, to visions of wealth and prosperity, and so on.

I originally started using landscape forms because I wanted to attempt to resolve how to form occurrences in nature that tie me to a particular place in the western landscape. What interest me are those intangible and unstable qualities, such as shifts in weather, the melting of snow on a warm spring day, the way a mountain looks through fog, how a form in space changes as you drive through it. These things aren't landscape per se, but give resonance to the experience of landscape. However, even those experiences now echo what I've read, what I know about the history of landscape. I think it's impossible to separate that. To me, perception is inflected by understanding and experience.

AR: Your work's references to landscape in the past have been influenced by aspects of Asian culture. Much commentary about your work focused on your use of the tropes present in Chinese landscape painting. Obviously, this has now changed in your more recent work. Why? And what was the path towards where you are today?

JD: Early on I wanted to make sculpture that gave the viewer a complex space in which to travel, to enter into, and to experience the landscape through phenomena. Earthworks did this, Light and Space installations did this, architecture does this, gardens, and Sung, Ming and Yuan Dynasty Chinese Landscape paintings did this especially well in my mind. I wanted to do this with objects. I studied all of these subjects, especially gardens and Chinese painting, which gave me a great deal to explore in terms of cultural ideas about landscape and how those affect attitudes towards the shaping of built landscape spaces.

The tropes in Chinese landscape painting opened up for me very abstract ideas that I could draw upon for the construction of space. At the same time, I was also

very intrigued by the application of visual rules prescribed in both painting and garden-making manuals which stated, in essence: "if you do this, you will get this." It was so completely different from how I learned to make art, which was, essentially, no rules. So, for example if you place a rock here, and here, and here, either in a painting or in a landscape, it will extend the space in a particular way. Now, the translation from watercolor and ink on paper, or moving around rocks and plants in the landscape, to plastic and plaster in space, is a huge jump. And the work wasn't really about Chinese landscape painting. But, I think that connection was what drew the most attention. As the work evolved, I began to use just a particular feature pulled out of the landscape as a way to explore more metaphorical ideas about presence through absence. For instance, an early piece titled *Passing A Pleasant Summer* from 1997 is a long meandering river tracing a path through space, and was formed by what *wasn't* there—the rocks and mountains. It levitated and floated, and this became a very powerful idea to sculpturally explore anti-gravity, especially in regards to landscape. That was a linear piece, and eventually led to other linear pieces about the tide and the elusive edge where land and water meet, and that was very Southern California to me. That is also what in due course brought me to this current work.

AR: What is your relationship to Los Angeles, or California for that matter, as a place to conceive of and produce artworks? Does the ethos and history of California as a place as well as an idea play into your production?

JD: For me the history of California is that it is a place that has attracted the type of individual wanting to live life on the edge, or who at least has the wherewithal to thrive on shaky ground, symbolically as well as literally. If there was some kind of genetic testing that could be done in regards to human migratory inclinations, we would most likely discover that many Californians, or perhaps more specifically, Angelinos, share some deep patterns, like flocks of birds. This is an incredibly rich environment, there's enough sun and water to thrive, and it accepts transplants well. Obviously metaphors abound, but I'm drawn to biodiversity and I've always felt comfortable here.

AR: In our discussions you have talked about, how, from your perspective, there is a strong relationship to California Light and Space Art. Specifically, you have mentioned Robert Irwin. How do you see your work fitting into this lineage, either directly or tangentially?

JD: For me Light and Space is more tangential to my practice but it has also provided important lessons or ideas about perception. Robert Irwin's history of perceptual investigations particularly interest me, and I love how the paring down in his work ultimately led to completely flamboyant gardens and built landscapes. However, when I was in school, I really was inspired by artists such as Eva

Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Linda Benglis, Robert Morris, the so called post-minimalist work, anti-form and process work. In particular the piece *Hang-Up* (1966) by Eva Hesse has always been a touchstone for me, absolutely brilliant, as well as the installation-based pour pieces of Lynda Benglis. That work has had a huge impact on how I think about sculpture and space.

AR: What about James Turrell? Something in your recent work speaks to his work, especially this idea of controlling how light changes hard forms. In his case, it is actual. In your case, it is vis-à-vis the use of raked airbrush technique, or, rather, implied.

JD: James Turrell is really an alchemist with light. He's able to take light and have you perceive form, using light as a material. In his work that investigates the Ganzfeld effect, illusions produced from sensory deprivations, the effects can be almost dizzying and disorienting. I do hope that the way I'm using color, juxtapositions of color, and the way that the color is applied and interacts with form, that I'm able to create a kind of disorienting effect. That quality is actually quite important to me in this work. I like how Turrell talks about carrying color with you as an afterimage, and how it then affects the next perception in one of his multipart installations. My work is so much more literal and physical than that, being that it's an object, but I am trying to make one color take another color with it, into it, and then emerge as a new color by using paint as light.

One of the things that is amazing to me, and it's probably because I'm so new to the use of paint in this way, is how the airbrush puts color down. It's so disorienting at times. Color barely lays on the surface. It's almost like there's space between colors, air between colors. Sometimes I actually hand rub it, and sometimes I leave it alone, and the color acts completely differently. Turrell pulls in light and creates new, pure, visual experience that is probably about as close to not being inflected by prior knowledge as it's possible to get. I really like that. However, I'm more apt to consider internalized prior experience, and I attempt to recreate that. I'm also definitely thinking about places or ideas about the environment *outside* of the sculpture, and using those as inspiration in the making of the forms.

AR: Another aspect of your work that is very important to me is the presence of your hand in the work. This seems very specific and intentional in a way that asserts the importance and necessity of the artist as author. Is this an imperative for you?

JD: Actually, when I'm making my work I'm constantly amused at how much it resembles the hand-training I had as a child—cooking, baking, sewing, doll house designing, candle making, fort building, mud pie making, snow ball rolling, garden digging. I grew up using my hands and making things. That has never

gone away. I love the old saying, *idle hands, idle minds*. There's a lot of research into the connections between hand use and language, and hand movements and the forming and conveying of ideas. When our ancestors left the trees for the savannas, language and tool making were able to develop. I can think best when I'm working, and I really love the experiment of making something do what I imagine it doing. It's a constant challenge, really exhausting but also incredibly satisfying, and I would never give that all away to someone else.

AR: What about studio practice? No assistants or fabricators means one is alone for long periods of time. To me this is precious and tantamount to the reason I continue my practice. Do you have a similar relationship to your practice?

JD: One aspect I was really drawn to in my studies of Chinese Landscape painting was the painterly poetics of individual isolation in the wilderness. However, these pictured isolated wilds were actually often paintings of private garden estates surrounded by urban areas. That encapsulates my ideal life—isolation, surrounded by a garden, with an urban culture readily at hand. I love being alone in the studio, preferably for hours on end. I rarely use assistants because a lot of my decisions are made throughout the process, and it's easier for me to do it than to direct someone. I'm definitely not anti-assistant, and I have had wonderful assistants now and then. Sometimes I wish I could figure out how to better use them, but, for the most part, it's just me and my work.

AR: We have discussed, to a great extent, your recent interest in painting. You mentioned several times that you were looking at much more painting than sculpture. Can you speak to this?

JD: In some ways my approach to making sculpture is similar to how a lot of painters work out their ideas—that is, through exploring ideas in a series using the same materials over and over. This is a working method that seems to work for me. In my earlier work I integrated color into the materials as I cast them, so color was more integral with material. In this work, I'm not casting, and I'm working directly and applying color after the form is finished. This has necessitated a pretty steep learning curve in terms of the use of paint: color, under painting, the effects of light on surface, all of those things that are really the purview of painting. So, I've also been looking at painting in a practical way, to see what I can learn, and sometimes just to be inspired.

AR: My feeling about this body of work is that there is a strong relationship specifically to abstract painting. I think of David Reed, Bernard Frieze, Bill Jensen, and Mary Heilman, to name a few. Yet, there are specific pieces of your work, such as *Driving Through Utah* (2010), that are very imagistic. In

contemporary painting today this objective/non-objective mash-up is very present. The relationship between abstract and representational painting seems to have eroded. What is your relationship to abstraction and how specific is this forcing the two ideas—abstraction and representation—into a coherent body of work?

JD: Abstractly, painting has a much easier time putting image in an imaginary space then sculpture does. Sculpture, by it's nature, exists in actual space. A painting can be image-based or process-based, but it's still, in essence, an abstraction. So painting both physically as well as conceptually has a comfortable time moving around in this space between the objective and the non-objective. It's one of the main reasons I'm really drawn to painting—it can be akin to magic. However, I think three-dimensionally and my ideas are conceived in relation to actual forms. I'm interested in abstract ideas involving space and I want my sculpture to exist in abstract space. But that can't exist physically, so the sculptures have to develop space around themselves, and sometimes they become more or less abstract, depending on the ideas of space I'm trying to create. For example, in *Mexican Blanket* (2010), I was thinking about the way a river moves down a valley, across a plane, and then disappears out of sight. It does this over and over and over, and slowly the line it traces through that space shifts the space around it and it is in constant flux. As it does this, light falls on it and it plays out in all of the colors of the spectrum, but we don't really perceive that because we usually just perceive what we think we know. I wanted to make a sculpture about that idea—time, movement, color, light, mountain, valley, and plain. It moves back-and-forth between a representation, an experience, and an idea, and if we saw it all at the same time it would be similar to a hallucination. So, in one way it is a sculpture that is about seeing time.