

Terry Winters with John Corbett

John Corbett is a writer, musician, radio host, teacher, record producer, concert promoter, and gallery owner based in Chicago. In addition to teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he is a regular contributor to *DownBeat* Magazine and codirects Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery in Chicago.

JOHN CORBETT *These are very large prints. I was thinking about the idea of amplification. Amplification as an intensification and amplification along two axes within the Atmospheres series—scale and accumulation.*

TERRY WINTERS *They're large for prints, but not necessarily large in terms of gesture and touch. They're all "life-size," geared towards the scale of the body, and also in the sense that they relate very directly to the scale of my current paintings. I wanted to see how I could transpose some of the imagery I'd been developing through a new process and situation. The printmaking size gets amplified in keeping to the range of mark making I'd been developing with the paintings.*

They feel to me like they're grappling with levels of density of image and pattern, so they have an amplified feeling in terms of the harmonics. If you have two patterns that are related but slightly different and you superimpose them and get a third pattern, or other artifacts derived from that kind of action.

There's a rhythmic complexity, both in terms of the gestural mark and the material buildup. There's a syncopation pushing the imagery towards a critical mass where it's suddenly complete and can't accept any more information. Then they're fully loaded and begin to broadcast a kind of signal.

It has something to do with making the rectangle ring a certain way, making it hum. The prints are not passage-based; they're not segmented, sectional. They ring at a certain frequency...

Ring them bells! That was Duchamp's suggestion: make a painting of frequency. And each print does have a

kind of ring to it, a buildup of energies that give off an atmospheric charge within the viewing space. A drive or pulse, all the activity that's happening on the surface.

Relationships between painting and music are sometimes drawn in a facile way—the assertion that gestural abstraction has something to do with expressionistic jazz, or something like that. And I'm thinking about how people talk about drone, anything with constancy in it, they tend to think of color field painting. To me, that misses certain things that are going on in the music. Color makes vibrations a certain way. But by being so restricted in color, these prints allow you to see other things, like particles, particle accumulation and dissipation, the atmospheric quality, really like when you have sound in a room. These feel like the boundaries of the rectangle end up being the room that's getting vibrated.

And they could offer a picture of that, almost like acoustic or fluid dynamics. The painting-music correlations do end up running into clichés about the correspondence. The restricted color allowed me to develop patterning systems and focus on the accumulation of material. The sequencing of screens, plus the number of printings, allows for a space to develop step by step. An evolving temporal space.

Unlike painting, where each move attends to a specific area, here each of the screens is going to be a layer that deals with the whole image.

Yeah, but that's really the approach in the paintings too. That's a key element for me. The entire surface and all the material is in parallel progression constantly. Through that sequential and overall application of information, different intensities form over the surface,

and each layer affects the previous one in a way that's unpredictable. It's a series of all-over applications, without trying any kind of balancing act. It's not grid-like either, there are different hubs of information, so that although everything isn't equally distributed, everything is equally important and contributes in some way to the overall evolution of the picture. And there's a forward motion that's almost diagrammatic in terms of the printmaking process because it's all-at-once. They're continually propelled forward, so they keep accumulating until... I'm out of the process. I've been approaching the paintings in the same way. More elements are in play with the paintings, but the ambition is the same; that each individual print is complete in itself.

Looking at your recent paintings, I was thinking about a certain approach to the psychedelic in them. When you're dealing with highly saturated colors, it adds a different layer to it. But these almost feel like black-and-white psychedelia.

Yes, definitely.

In Op art the erratic or irrational element is removed, and what you are left with is a perfectly rational system of visual disturbance. In these there's some system, but there's also something that throws the system akimbo.

They take shape in an almost immeasurable non-mathematical space so you can't rationalize the logic of the imagery. And in that non-metric state, there's a way that one locks on mentally in trying to read and sort out the signals from the noise. That traction or quality of turbulence is hopefully where the pictures emerge. There's a sense of likeness or image that begins to evolve out of the abstract nature of the print or painting.

They become definite pictures of something that you haven't seen before.

I think so. That's the ambition, in some sense. That's my entertainment! There's a reconfiguration using the world's abstract vocabulary, which then produces imagery that has a likeness. And that was de Kooning's observation, "Even abstract shapes must have a likeness." It's one of the great potentials of painting and one of the great differences between painting and music. In the end, a picture is produced.

And the picture in music is always metaphorical. As in a tone poem, there's not a literal picture. But I do think it's interesting to think of the non-metric aspect of these prints. That's a place where there is a literal connection between them and certain music. These have an organic quality that links them, to me, more with improvised music than with, say, minimalism.

The organic meaning what?

The sense of breaking the system, not rigid adherence. Drummer Milford Graves, for instance, he can do all sorts of crazy combinations of times, 12 against 13, things that have a very complex mathematical result, but they don't come from him sitting and computing them in advance, they emerge from a feeling. That inherently has a more organic sense.

I guess I'm interested in those oppositions or juxtapositions, which is why I'm so taken with Ligeti's music. It's amazing how he writes and programs compositions that are so wildly complex. You just can't get to those places organically. He builds something that's beyond both the organic and non-organic, almost like a third

system; something that uses the strengths of both systems to build a new category of work. It's a synthetic combination of his knowledge of theory, the anatomy of the hand, and musical history both Western and ethnographic—he was very involved with Pygmy chanting and drumming.

Ligeti introduced an irrational element into it; it's not just playing out permutations or running input into a machine.

It's very emotional and psychological and transcendent. That's why Kubrick used it in 2001. It has this amazing quality of expansion. And amplification, like you're saying.

It amplifies it in terms of an emotional register, not only volumetrically. I feel that way about looking at these prints. There's something in them that stirs also in that emotional way. Maybe the patina is important in that respect.

Yeah, that's all part of their atmospheric quality. That shadowy space had been squeezed out of so much abstract painting. Those atmospherics, the chiaroscuro, are a consequence of moving material around, and they contain so much psychology and emotional resonance. I'm trying to play with that directly and indirectly in order to drive the imagery into another space. That resulting, unpredictable place somehow becomes the subject or contains the meaning.

Where it comes out of your control. It's something you've set in motion, but it surprises and maybe delights you.

That's the goal, to be surprised. And to get out of the way and see it happen. It's a paradoxical situation where I'm building the images, trying to be as pragmatic as possible, just mapping the patterns and responding to the material.

Something that strikes me is how much of a personality each of them has. There's a sense that although they're of a group, they feel like...

...a family of forms. But within the family there are these singularities that pop up. That's part of the challenge—how to develop each one to be singular and autonomous, independent within a larger grouping of similar forms.

A test of that is whether you can remember them. It's a good test of any abstraction—is it memorable? Does it have a distinctive image? How specifically can you remember it when you walk away? Like they have their own...

...face.

A face, exactly. Sleep on it and if you can remember it in the morning, that's a good sign. If de Kooning's right and abstract shapes need to have likeness, then they should be memorable.

That's an exciting possibility for abstract painting, to utilize the strategies and approaches of representational painting towards other ends. To make another kind of representation—an isomorphic model. To inject information with the kind of physicality that painting can supply.

It's about an unimagined image.

They're imaginary, but I couldn't have imagined them, I had to build them. It's a manual imagination. It comes out of the working process and the specific dynamics of the materials. Maybe this imaginary space links up with what you're saying about the psychedelic. Imaginary

space can be a product of materiality and logistics. Being a product of those real-world activities doesn't make it any less psychedelic or emotional. And for me, that's one legacy of minimalism.

That situates minimalism as a very expansive process.

Yeah, it's painting as both fact and fiction. Particularly at a time when so much of what we're seeing is incorporeal and scale-free. The specificity of material and size and the physical experience of viewing allows for a different engagement, maybe even mind-expanding.

John Corbett is a writer, musician, radio host, teacher, record producer, concert promoter, and gallery owner based in Chicago. In addition to teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he is a regular contributor to *DownBeat* Magazine and codirects Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery in Chicago.