

In Conversation with Clifford Ross

Andrew L. Schoelkopf

Andrew L. Schoelkopf: Let's start at the beginning. Was there a moment you recall at which you determined that you wanted to be an artist or a painter or a photographer?

Clifford Ross: I went to college thinking I was going to become involved with law and politics, with no interest in becoming an artist. Freshman year, my advisor looked at the heavy course load I'd chosen and said that there was way too much homework and that I needed one class that was a bit lighter, like an art class. I grew up around art; it wasn't an unknown to me, so I signed up—but sort of as an oblique thing. By the end of a first semester sculpture class, I remembered how much I loved working with my hands in grade school, taking shop classes and making landscapes with crayons and cotton balls. I got hooked, took an art history class second semester, and another art class, and off I went. I've never looked back.

ALS: I've imagined, since we first met, our experiences as children were somehow similar, in as much as we were always immersed with artists and others around us who were devoted to art. Was that your experience?

CR: My family was basically split between business, politics, and the creative world of painting, writing, and so on. My father was a businessman with various other interests, and my mother made tapestries. Helen Frankenthaler was my aunt, and my mother's other sister was a writer. I was bathed in that *art* thing; I just didn't realize it. Helen was sort of a bohemian spirit in a generally uptight family, and I think it seeped into me. And as life unfolded, I became close not just to Helen but to her first husband, Bob Motherwell. They got married in the living room of our apartment when I was about six years old.

ALS: At one point in our discussions, we were talking about William Bailey, who was a huge part of my childhood because my father, Robert Schoelkopf, represented

him. We hung out at Yale a lot in those days and spent a lot of social time with the Bailey family, I had the experience of Bailey and other artists trying to teach me how to draw when I was a kid. Did you have anybody who sat down with you and taught you to draw?

CR: Bill Bailey was a mentor of mine at Yale—a soft-spoken, very cultured guy who loved art history. He taught an intermediate drawing class, which I heard was great—although I had no business being in the class since I couldn't draw. He eventually let me into the class since I refused to take “no” for an answer. He's still underappreciated as an artist. And “yes” and “no” about drawing. Bill recognized figure drawing wasn't going to be my passion at Yale, but I picked it up pretty well years later at the National Academy of Design, along with sculpture and painting.

ALS: One of the things I didn't understand at first about Bailey's work, is that he was on the cover of the influential book *American Realism* and most people still think of him as a realist just as they do with Giorgio Morandi. It's sometimes hard to remember that their paintings had extraordinarily abstract qualities. Your work is abstract and evolves out of representation—realism to some extent. So, I just want to talk a little bit about how that idea formulates in your mind and how you had the initial instinct to start making abstract paintings based on perhaps your best-known works which are photographs of the natural world.

CR: Realism and abstraction are just tools of expression, like paintbrushes or cameras. For creative people, the job is to get across a feeling, a point of view—to share it with the viewer by whatever means. Titian's portrait of Charles V in the Museo del Prado resonates for me just like a great Mark Rothko. I've seesawed between realism and abstraction my whole career. When I'm jammed, having come up short somehow in a realist mode, I can pivot to

abstraction—and vice versa. Shifting gears allows me to refresh and take another shot. Trying to bottle the sublime is a reasonable pursuit in either mode. But, even as a photographer, abstract painting has always been a touchstone. My first show of photographs in 1997 was titled *Paintographs and Photographs*.

ALS: In previous conversations, we've talked about the generations of artists that really helped to create the early generations of abstraction. We have also talked about earlier Modernist works which one could argue are quite abstract even though we see clearly the natural inspirations they emerge from. Is that what you were thinking about at the time when you started making this body of work?



Marsden Hartley, *Abstraction*, 1912–13.
Oil on canvas, 46½ × 39¾ inches (118.1 × 101 cm).
Private collection



Arthur Dove, *Willows*, 1940. Oil on gesso on canvas,
25 × 35 inches (63.5 × 88.9 cm). The Museum of Modern
Art, New York. Gift of Duncan Phillips, 471.1941

CR: Hartley, Dove, and Marin became foundational for me starting in the late 1980s. I loved their commitment to the real world and abstraction—as well as to paint. Their works are central to what I'm doing now. Hey, my passion for Dove led me to your gallery a few years ago.

ALS: There existed different moods and different moments for Hartley, and we see them in a way we don't experience with many artists because the fissure between those two modes is faster and deeper with Hartley than it is with other artists. But if we look at John Marin, Dove, or if we look at that specific moment of 1911–12, which is a really extraordinary moment for American abstraction, most of those artists take a natural image and disassemble it. Or they use Cubism to assemble something around that natural image and create something different. Your approach here appears to be related but is quite different, which is that you've taken the inspiration from this extraordinary photograph, and you've changed its color register and moved different pieces of it around into a jumble of the natural world, and then you paint over it.

CR: You know, what's underneath these paintings differs. Some have portions of the “ancestor” photograph in black and white negative. Others have a Synthetic Cubist

structure with a lot of color, where the real world is abstracted using computer-generated animation and Photoshop. The underlying aesthetic of the early American abstract artists is mine too—just updated. One other element is automatism, central to the Abstract Expressionists, which allows for my wrist and subconscious to lead. I go into a sort of creative free fall, making marks in dialogue with previous marks—not just the underlying image. Instinct rules. I never know what a finished painting will look like. I don't even know which side will be up.

ALS: There are many great quotes from artists about how abstraction emerges from nature or art is a representation of the beauty of nature. There's one in particular that's always struck me, by Marc Chagall, which is: "Great art picks up where nature ends."

I'm wondering what you think of that when you take an image of nature. The great photograph that viewers can see in the catalogue and the exhibition is, at first blush, a very static, quite austere, and quiet image. My impression of the artworks that you've painted following

is that they are a complete departure in terms of the emotion and the energy you layer on top of them. I can almost envision a trance-like approach to obscuring that nature and leaving "what remains..."—the topic of the exhibition. But I think many people look at abstraction as an additive process. Your approach here is more of a reductive process seems to me.

CR: Right, the ancestral photograph under the graphite paintings is indebted to the quiet grandeur of the Hudson River School—Cole, Church, Bierstadt, and so on. But, some of the images underneath the works in this show are colorful and ecstatic. And the painted marks have the same attitude. The marks are a dance. Think Vaslav Nijinsky. If the work seems complete at an early stage, I stop painting, and the Nijinsky side of things is the story. It's the livelier side of nature. But the more the marks cover the surface, the quieter the works become. A somber quality gets in the door.

ALS: In looking at a few of the works in the exhibition, some of them contain that underlying image within an



Clifford Ross, *Mountain XIII*, 2006. Chromogenic print, 75 × 131 inches (190.5 × 332.7 cm). Courtesy of the artist



Clifford Ross, *Shadow of Basalt*, 1994. Oil and papier-mâché on panel, 71 x 58 inches (180.3 x 147.3 cm). Private collection



Clifford Ross, *Untitled (Study for Shadow of Basalt)*, 1994. Ink and pencil on tracing paper, 9 x 7½ inches (22.9 x 19.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist

image that is identifiable, and if one knows the source imagery for the colorful prints in the background, one can understand where it came from. You've changed the color register, you've dynamically turned, twisted, steered them, you've zoomed in and zoomed out on little captions or little pieces. And on the other hand, there is another picture that is almost completely blanketed with paint. So, that's what made me think that the abstraction is a reductive process. You're reducing, obscuring from our view of the underlying image. Is that part of your process or thought process, or no?

CR: After painting a lot of these paintings over imagery, I kept looking at one that had been completely over-painted. And that's when I wondered if I had the strength to paint something without any imagery underneath. To begin and end with abstraction. It was a challenge to tangle with an issue that I've been struggling with since I started painting. It came to this: can I paint a good picture without the runway of nature?

ALS: Let's use that as a point of departure to go back to the amount of time that's passed since you had your last

painting show, nearly thirty years. In between, you have been very active—always making art, relentlessly exhibiting art, creating very ambitious public installations of art. Was that a thoughtful decision to stop painting or stop showing your paintings for a period?

CR: I never abandoned painting. One day around '94, my dealer at the time saw hundreds of tiny photos, cheap black and white contact prints, on the floor of my painting studio and asked about them. I explained they were just my private notes. But he insisted on putting three of those photographs into my next painting show with him. I hated the idea. But he was persuasive, and the small photos stood up to my large-scale paintings. They seemed legitimate, they had a real message and feeling. That's the moment photography came and got me, but in my mind, I never quit painting.

ALS: One of the things that's always struck me about you is that you're not just having a series of experiences, you're on a journey. And these paintings have always felt to me like a journey. With the benefit of hindsight, now we can look back to where the imagery started, from a photo-

graph of a mountain and the step you took with that photograph into computer-generated animation. You even got Philip Glass to create an original score for your first video in 2010.

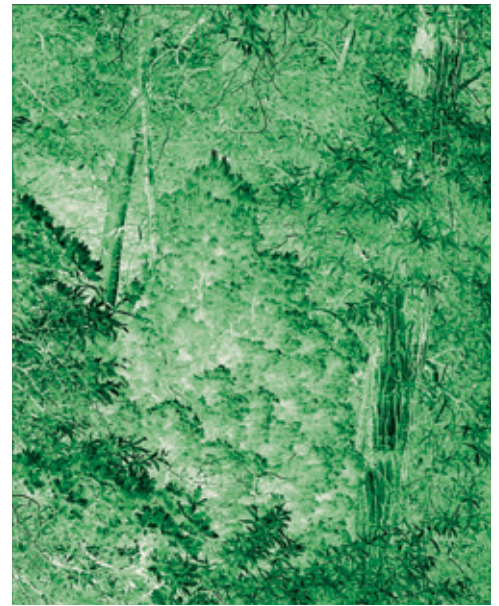
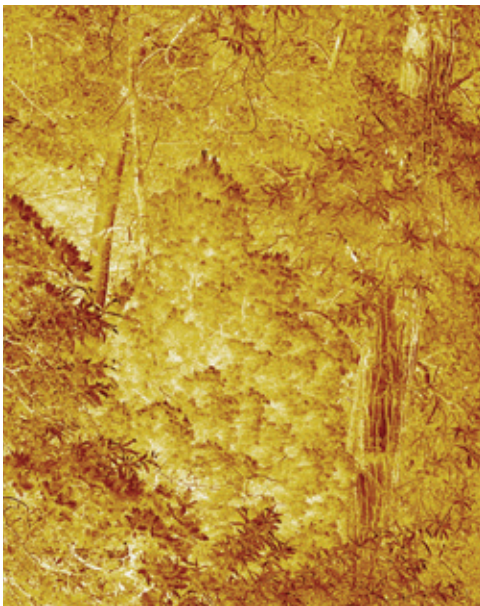
CR: I spent most of five years making fourteen photographs of Mount Sopris, building a camera, figuring out how to print 9-by-18-inch color negatives, convert them to massive digital files, and so on. Five years to make fourteen images. But at a certain point, I felt that I hadn't captured certain aspects of the mountain—the excitement I felt as the weather changed, the thrill of its size . . . so in steps over years, I turned the image into something else while searching for its hidden aspects. *Harmonium Mountain*, the video with Phil's score, was just another attempt to bring the mountain to the viewer. Although the computer-animation was built from a still image of the mountain—a serene start—it takes off into something effervescent, filled with movement and wild color, before returning to serenity.

ALS: One of the things I've wondered, particularly upon seeing these works in a sequence, is what are you hearing and thinking as you're painting them?

CR: I listen to music a lot. I've had phases over decades, love affairs with different types of music. I listen to classical, rock'n'roll, jazz. Clapton and Callas are good companions in the studio.

Not to be fancy pants about this, but one of my favorite quotes is from Walter Pater: "All art aspires to the condition of music." I read it years ago, and it stayed with me. My first book of photographs was called *Wave Music*. I aspire to the condition of music for my work, to make something that goes right to the heart.

ALS: Your gesture goes from applying a lot of very dense pigments to obscure something or cover something, to passages where a whole blanket has fallen over a big part of the picture, or alternatively, a very staccato gesture on top. I'm wondering if that is inspired by the mood or the music?



LEFT TO RIGHT: Clifford Ross, *Harmonium I*, *Harmonium III*, *Harmonium IV*, 2008. Archival pigment ink on Japanese paper, each 39½ × 31¾ inches (100.3 × 80.6 cm)



Clifford Ross, *Harmonium Rain II*, 2021. Pigment ink on matte film, 46 × 34 inches (116.8 × 86.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist

CR: Those marks, which are in all of the works, come from a movement in my wrist that's in my paintings all the way back to 1980. It's in my wrist somewhere, and there's something about an accelerating brushstroke that's always thrilled me. But the marks aren't just on top. They're my constant gesture, what's underneath the blanket of graphite . . . the hidden life. It's something in me, and the music just helps get the wrist going to put it out there.

Listen, I never know where these paintings are going. Never. At any given moment, I think I do, and then I'm surprised to see where they want to go. At some point, it

feels like a painting is done. Willem de Kooning said he stopped when a painting had “a countenance”—a certain stability, but he didn't look for a painting to be “finished” in a traditional sense. It's just where it wants to be.

ALS: Let's take a step back and talk about how they're made.

CR: There are a lot of steps—so many you don't want to hear about them all. It's quite mad: a color photograph of a mountain, coming up short, my love for nineteenth-century paper negatives, handmade Japanese paper, coming up short, color, computer animation, stained glass. It's a long trail. I'm propelled by a love of materials and nature. I was jammed in the studio during Covid, picked up a pencil and began to make marks on a print. I'm not a pencil guy, but something clicked. The more I used it, the more I discovered the magic—and eventually remembered that liquid graphite was used by a number of artists. The material is mysterious, sensual, allows for erasure, polishing, and has a certain will of its own. I felt liberated.

ALS: Which brings us back to the title of this current project and exhibition. *What Remains...* harkens back to a poem that was very meaningful to you. One of my personal favorite works in the show is also titled *What Remains...*, among the most abstract of the images to my eye. Do you think of that as a summation of this series?

CR: I don't think of this as a summation because this is never going to end. You'll have to knock on my coffin to tell me it's over.