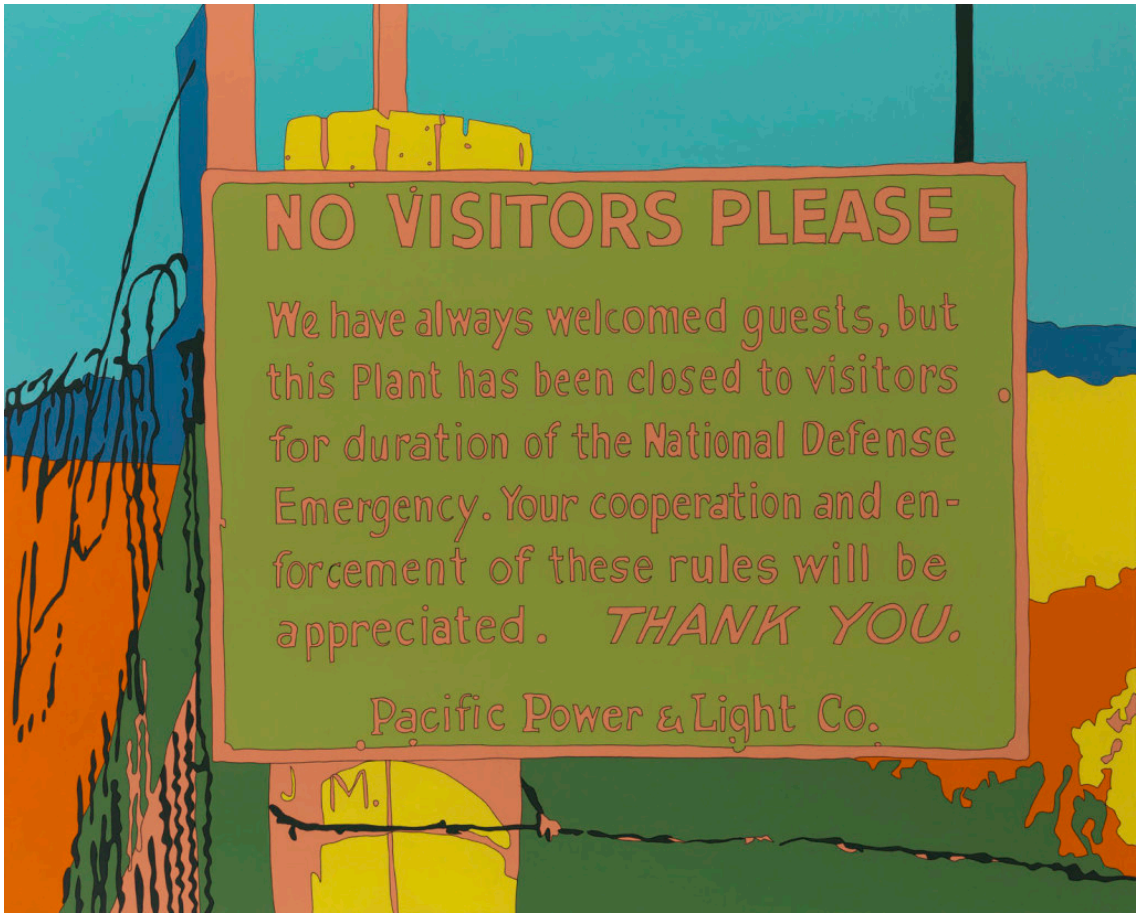
Let us now Praise Famous Men
Lisa Ruyter
December 2011

In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss. – Giorgio Agamben

Many have revisited the Library of Congress' FSA/OWI archive of Depression-era photographs. These images, produced through government agency quite miraculously transcend propaganda, and have become the material of an American identity. It is a defining and generative archive, ever more so as it is digitized, repeated and further disseminated.

There are lessons to be found in this archive containing an army of readily reanimated ghosts. These ghosts are sacred spirits to some, untouchable for what they represent. To 'appropriate' therefore becomes another assault on their memory, as if any previous incarnation had ever been free of appropriation. These photos are of Americans, and they represent those who go unnoticed, unrecognized and, um, unrepresented. They are us, or at least some idea that we have of ourselves, they belong to us because of the way that they came into our world, as photos, not as people. It is a record of what was already being lost to Americans even as it was being constructed, an American dream of self-determination, independence and freedom.

A photograph, pre-material, eventually finds expression through a specific photographic print, or transmission via computer.



Scale, a secondary concern, is completed within the expanded space that is the viewer's experience, an experience that will always be more in the present than the photograph itself ever was or could be. The image is completed in our imagination much in the way that our eyes create our sense of three-dimensional space. Scale can sometimes be determined through a sense of urgency and history. There is this type of scale in these portraits of depression era poverty, as well as in the lensless photographic print of bodies fixed onto the sidewalk and buildings by the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, or the fixing of a prehistoric human hand on the wall of a cave.

There is great concern over the 'authenticity' of a photograph, this flighty, ghost-like image thing, which lives outside of its material boundaries. This ghost can be combined and contextualized and used for journalism, propaganda or art, for private or for public consumption, and even then still has a life outside of this fixing of use. Photographs become evermore reanimations, brought to life (or death) by its author and creating zombie havoc independent of any intentions of that author. Yet somehow there is always a concern about its relationship to proof, truth- or lie- telling, to something that somehow existed, in the past, which seems to make up for its lack of concretization of its own existence.

So, the photographic ghost has some kind of individuation over its material containers. Is it possible that the world has always been so haunted, and the development of photography has made it possible for these boundaries between life and death to become more permeable?

Color functions very similarly to the ghost behind the images of photography. Its history is fugitive, tied to objects and to technological developments. Where questions of truth are tied to our photographic ghost, quite the opposite can be said of color, despite scientific investigations. Like the ghost, it too seems to have strong relationships to light and chemicals in becoming visible. There are traces of color in history, but for the most part color tends to escape, leaving only whatever it had been temporarily tied to.

Color seems to remain in a sort of potentially trauma-inducing state. It is preverbal, which hints at a potential of universality. However, the same use of color can carry extremely different cultural interpretations.

Strong color, even in a photograph, has an impact, something lived and experienced, but somehow still in conflict with the truth measure or reality check of a photographic act.

Color moves faster than theory – from natural objects (pigments from the earth) to pure fabrication back to just light of the computer screen- color is tied to physicality, to material natures, even though it has no material nature of its own. It can make the viewer an actor of gestures, in trying to name this and that – in trying to read what is being named. Color is a challenge to the status quo. Even when seemingly polite, contained and proper in its given structure, it still looks to make trouble. The lens itself is an organizing structure, a tool to frame something and consider it in a different context. It can subjectify just as well as it can objectify. In photography, abstraction has been banished to the same netherworld as the originating capture. There never was any such thing as abstraction. But it is almost impossible to deny that there exists some sort of real originating thing to a photograph, at two levels: the indexical and the spectral. Indexical faith seems to persist, as does the belief that a brush stroke (after the making of it) is gestural, rather than a representation of a gesture. An abstract painting is already a contradiction, a fixing of something non-fixable, as in gesture.

Medium is often used to describe the material nature of an artwork: ‘silver gelatin print’ or ‘acrylic on canvas’ for example. I propose that the artist is the medium, materializing specters to varying degrees of recognition in material form.

There are now millions of photographs being added daily, often without much thought, to countless numbers of archives. Re-posting and repetition of photographs happens automatically; even the most lost, forgotten and un-looked-at snapshot is being constantly backed up and transferred. Archiving has become an automatic and natural process, eroding a section of delimitation between library and museum. Our mass archive is beginning to take on a 1:1 scale with Borges' Library. A kind of echolalia has replaced gesture.

Is it possible that one of the most paradigmatic forms of cultural artifact for this 'time' is that of the archive? Roy Stryker's FSA/OWI archive provides a pretty great study case.

This is an example of the heading on the tabs organizing the filing cabinets holding the handling prints of the FSA/OWI photo archive at the Library of Congress:

After regional arrangement

- · 14 – The Land–the background of civilization
- · 2 – Cities and Towns–as background
- · 3 – People–as such–without emphasis, excepting in the case of children, on their activity
- · 4 – Homes and Living Conditions
- · 52 – Transportation
- · 53-65 – Work–the economic basis of survival
- · 66-69 – Organized society–for security, justice, regulation, and assistance
- · 7 – War
- · 8-83 – Medicine and Health
- · 84-85 Religion
- · 86-88 – Intellectual and Creative Activity
- · 89-94 – Social and Personal Activity

and then further subcategories:

- 4 Homes and Living Conditions
- 41-43 Houses, rooms, furniture, people at home, visiting, hobbies
- 44-447 Life in tents, shacks, rooming houses, hobo jungles
- 448-46 Personal Care and habits, housework, cooking, eating, sewing, sleeping
- 47-48 Porches, yards, gardens, servants

How curious to try to categorize the subject matter of everyday life. In the case of this archive, geographical categories are at the top of the structure, with an idea of major categories under that with subcategories that tended to be tailored to the specific circumstances of everyday life of that geographical location. Nowadays, keywords help us navigate a digital catalog of the same images. What is everyday life? How could something not be everyday life? Perhaps we need a museum of everyday life? Somehow we are already building it in the process of living it.

James Agee writes in the introductory section of "Let us now Praise Famous Men," his and Walker Evans' epic collaborative study of three sharecropping families:

> *If I had explained myself clearly you would realize by now that through this non-"artistic" view, this effort to suspend or destroy imagination, there opens before consciousness, and within it, a universe luminous, spacious, incalculably rich and wonderful in each detail, as relaxed and natural to the human swimmer, and as full of glory, as his breathing: and that it is possible to capture and communicate this universe not so well by any means of art as through such open terms as I am trying it under.*
> *In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact. As for me, I can tell you of him only what I saw, only so accurately as in my terms I know how: and this in turn has its chief stature not in any ability of mine but in the fact that I too exist, not as a work of fiction, but as a human being.*

Atoms for Peace

(an interview by email, never published – 2008)

What drew you to following the Iran nuclear story as it unfolded at the IAEA?

A few years ago I met a journalist working on this story and began to follow it myself because of this friendship. I have also been long fascinated with the area where the UN buildings are located in Vienna, an odd place.

I had made some paintings of panel discussions with art professionals, and there was something very solid and different about the space of them, but I had a problem with them being art about the art world, so eventually I came to the thought that I should shoot a press event, or a conference about some very heavy topic, like this Iran nuclear story.

A friend who works for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization presented my request to the IAEA, which they accepted and very much supported.

Was it hard to get access to the IAEA Board of Gov's meetings?

Though it felt like a natural progression in my life movements, I am well aware that it must be a special thing, because of the reactions of some of the journalists, who wanted to know how I got permission to be there.

What did it mean to be an 'invited journalist'?

The IAEA was aware of what I make. I am not playing a role; rather my technique has an essential relationship to journalism, and I try to follow similar ethical grounds. I try to connect the studio to my life and there is always the question of what my relationship is to this situation of experience vs representation. The stories I follow send me from one experience to another, and that includes the experiences in the studio with a canvas. The ideas from one painting can send me back out into the world as it did in this case. When I am shooting a press conference with journalists, I am not there on assignment, nor am I there as an artist the way of courtroom sketches to fill in for a photographer. I was there looking for an interesting visual story which would be suitable for a series of paintings.

Mine is a kind of inverse journalism, or maybe it is photojournalism, or probably not journalism at all. I am there to try to hold on to my subjective view, to try to experience the space and the event with fresh (inexperienced) eyes, and perhaps try to find the story that everyone misses because they are so deeply involved. The decisions that I make in that press area are not all that different from those I make in the studio. I am there looking for visual material for a painting, one that I have in mind, and hopefully many that I did not. It is a practice of constant decisions about when to be open and when to be closed, like a shutter on a camera.

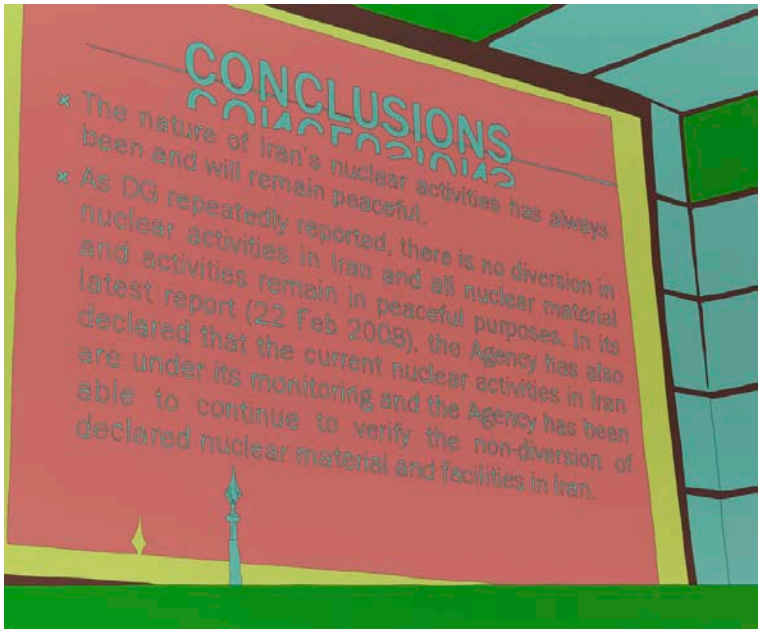
Of course there is a balance point existing between my journalistic remove and my subjective artistic involvement. That is an element of what I consider painting to be about. I think journalism is also about a process of rapid, on the spot, decision making as well.

This isn't the first time that you've blurred the boundaries between artist and reporter. Can you explain?

In 2005 I did a visual story for Interview magazine about the Paris Haute Couture shows. I was there on assignment, with tight deadlines, to cover certain shows, and with a mandate to give attention to the clothes on the models. I like this process, as it is very similar to the painting process for me. There is a fixed time and event, and every minute that passes I am making decisions that will affect my final output. A fashion story is so sexy, so glamorous, I thought it would be an interesting and revealing thing to force a comparison to the Iran nuclear story somehow. The journalists at the IAEA love the idea of me giving the ambassadors the same treatment that I gave Dior, Chanel and Lacroix. I still don't really understand why it is ethically ok to sexy up one story and wrong to do it to another. So many stories are told in a way that reinforces a disconnection many people feel when they read the paper or watch TV.

Were there restrictions on you when you were sitting in on these meetings?

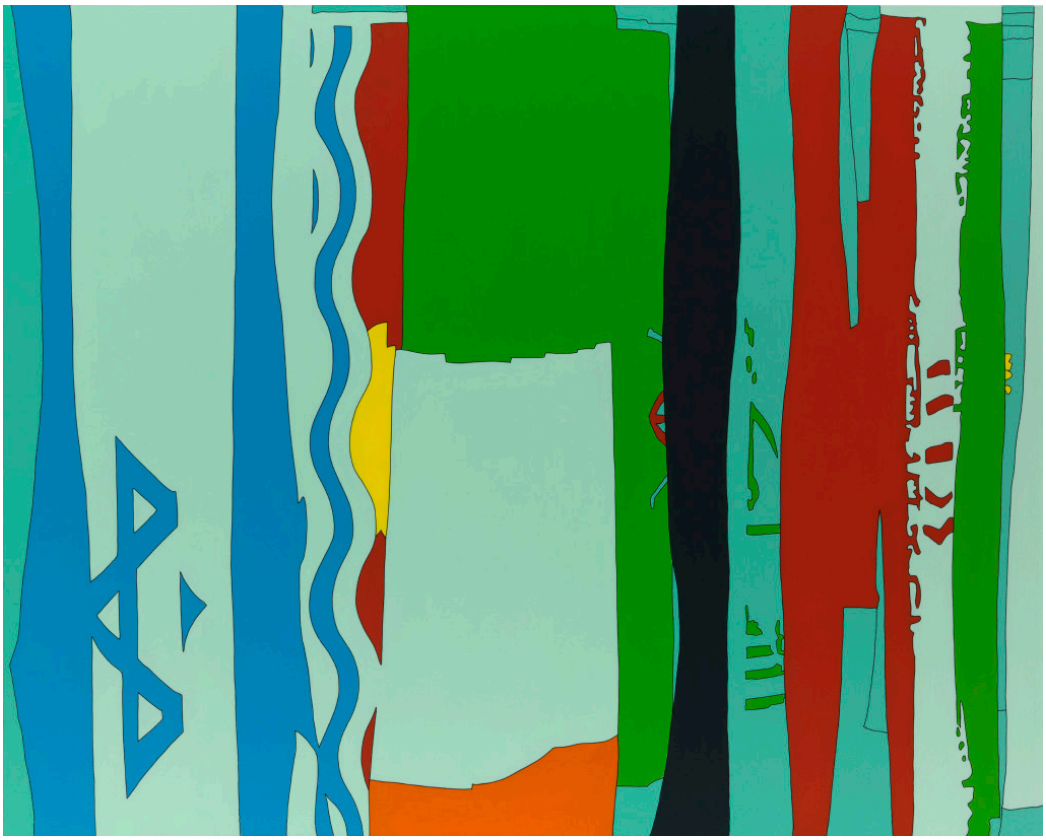
Nobody is allowed to actually be in the room while the meetings are in progress. My access is similar to what journalists have. It is a lot of sitting around and waiting. There is a kind of work area for journalists and there are never any chairs available, so I spent a lot of time sitting on the floor, going to the cafeteria, and talking to the journalists. I was taken at one point into a room that looks over the conference room during a meeting, which would certainly be a privileged access, which did make me a little nervous, like I might hear something that I did not want to have responsibility for.



What was the most surprising thing that you learnt listening into these discussions, about Iran's nuclear capabilities or otherwise?

I was not listening to these discussions as the meetings are closed meetings. I learned more from friends working in this field than I learned being there on the spot. There are plenty of press briefings, and it was kind of mind-blowing or rather mind-numbing to watch the repetitive interaction of Iran and the IAEA (and the USA) at this level, and to realize just how much must be going on below the surface and formality of this meeting. Something else that I realized is that this agency functions as a mediation point on what diplomatic topic is focused on in the press, and is really playing an important role in maintaining peace and balance, as more countries realize that nuclear technology can give them access to becoming a global player.

I would say that the most surprising thing I learned over the course of the year is something that I actually completely missed, was that a deal has nearly gone through for the US to be able to sell nuclear technologies and materials to India, a country that has never joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has also tested nuclear weapons. Somehow the US got a waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers Group despite an initial veto from Austria, Ireland and New Zealand who were voting on grounds of supporting the Non-Proliferation Treaty. India had to give up nothing to get this, no treaty signed, no binding promise to stop testing or building nuclear weapons. The truly shocking part to me is that it is not more than a tiny little blip in the news.



How do you use your photographs to create your paintings?

For me the process continues in my studio, rather than begins. I deal with the photographs that I have taken and begin to sort through them to find interesting compositions. I use a projector in drawing an image onto a canvas that has been prepared with a single color. Then I begin painting without returning to the source material and the decisions are made based primarily on formal concerns, which of course make a few collisions with the subjects. Very early I realized that this subject matter (people sitting at tables in a boardroom) has such an implied boredom that it was very important that the color be more high-key than muted. The very last step is to reinforce the drawing with a black line, as the drawing is the primary structure that holds the painting together. After working with the images for a few weeks I often have more ideas for photographs so I go back if I can to shoot some more.

At some point I came across the problem of a flag, and the obvious decision. Of course I opted to paint the flags close to the actual colors, there is no reason to be disrespectful, though I have done an experiment to the contrary in two paintings of football fans, just to see what it feels like. That was surprising to me, the emotional impact of a flag especially in that setting. This has had a huge impact on the exhibition that I am putting together for Georg Kargl's gallery, as I hope to be able to recreate

that feeling. That was an example of stumbling across subject matter that has a strong conceptual resonance in juxtaposition with the style that I have developed, and hopefully it will translate to an emotional equivalent in the context of the exhibition.

What do you hope to achieve with your acidic palette and color juxtapositions?

I hope to make a good painting, not a boring painting. It did occur to me that it could be interesting to see what this nuclear subject matter does to the way people write about my work. My colors have been described as acid, toxic, nuclear, radioactive, and I never know what to think about that, as it always sounds like an exaggeration to me. These descriptions tend to come more from Americans. In other countries my colors get a very different read, it is often thought that my bright colors indicate a very happy painting, which also seems like an exaggeration. But in this particular series, strong bright colors are really carrying the show, more than usual.

I think that has something to do with the space of these images, that space that I was originally after when I began this series. It has a strong relationship to graphic novels, there is just so much more flatness than I usually have in my work. I think it is because the architecture of the scenes are built for flatness, the podium where a press briefing is given, all of these rows that divide the way people arrange themselves in the conference room… I have a couple paintings from a power point presentation given by Iran to the press, and people tend to read the projected slide as a fixed sign, which, in the context of my work, reinforces the functioning of photography not painting.

What are your artistic influences?

My environment and the people that I meet are my greatest artistic influences. Lately I have been thinking a lot about a kind of Truman Capote or Tom Wolfe style literary journalism.

What's next?

I don't know. I am so deep in the middle of this one, and that usually means that I cannot see what is on the horizon. It has been a year or more of decisions about where to take this story, or to even figure out what it is. Do I follow the Iran story to the Security Council in New York if it goes there? Do I explore it more via alternate color schemes in the studio? Do I follow a lead and photograph at OPEC? I really want to do that one, if only so I can make a show titled "Oil Paintings."

I am a Camera

Excerpted from:
Lisa Ruyter: ONE MILLION POSTCARDS; published by Skarabaeus
Imitation of Life: A Conversation Between Lisa Ruyter and Michael Cohen (2007)

Michael Cohen: Your most recent exhibition of self-portraits in New York was titled I Am a Camera. That seems an apt description of the psychological state your paintings convey, one of distance and mechanical parts. Do you see those qualities in your work as well?

Lisa Ruyter: To a degree yes, but those qualities are aspects of a bigger picture. A camera is also a subjectifying device, despite the objective realism that photographic images are thought to convey. The camera frames, or outlines, a specific subject and makes an image via a distorting lens. You cannot specify what distance is without also by default defining closeness. I would say that my work covers a wider range on that particular spectrum than most people realize.

The title is also borrowed from the story that Cabaret is based on by Christopher Isherwood— of living in Berlin in the '30s. I have been living in Europe on or off for about three years, as I can't really decide where I want to live, and have become very aware of the mechanics of building a social network in a new, and not entirely inviting, environment. The experience has also made me very ambivalent about what it means to be an expatriate American, especially in such a strange moment in current global politics. While I do not have any special fascination or love for this story (my show is not a tribute, though I enjoyed Cabaret), I do identify with the position of its writer.

The word camera in the title also seemed to emphasize a formal approach of using a black-and-white palette in the paintings (actually all grays). I am not sure viewers really got that part of it. The style was utilized as a reminder of the photographic origins and to refer to the well-discussed ideas of realism in photography and cinema, rather than a self-reflexive countermove to the use of color that people know in my work. I have wanted to make black-and-white paintings for years now since seeing some of my work reproduced in black-and-white. But an idea like that needs compatible subject matter and nothing really fit well until I started making self-portraits again last year.

MC: How do these self-portraits reflect or differ from the more visually hyperactive ones you made in 1993?

LR: That seems like an obvious question, but it has taken me completely by surprise. The earlier self-portraits served a very specific function for me in the development of my art. Looking back, I see many connections I never noticed before, the most important being that the earlier series was the first occasion where I utilized photography. Those self-portraits were collaged from photographs that a friend took, where I had told him what I wanted to look like and he directed my poses to try to achieve that.

Before that body of work, I had developed a system of collaging images together. The point was to force disparate and conflicting images to function on the same field somehow, so the viewer would participate in the cognition of the pictures. Different patterns of images would stand out as significant to different people. To that effect, my selection of images was very subjective. I always stayed away from trying to explain why I wanted a diagram of an airport to function in tandem with Warhol flowers. The self-portraits came about because I was at a creative dead-end and having a bit of a crisis about subject matter. I was experimenting with different formulations and repetitions and patterning and putting images of all the same class together, animals for example. I felt I had created a system that reflected my view of what shaped our ideas of the world, but that there was something deeply missing, specifically: a reason to make the next picture. I felt I owned this drawing style and language, but that there was nothing that I really owned that had any materiality or substance to it as subject matter. So it seemed that pictures of myself were a good place to start and that led me to collage all the images together like I was trying to put myself together from all of these different parts.

The other major watermark in that body of work was that it was the first example of my using titles. Before that, all of my pieces were untitled. Each drawing was called Untitled but then followed in parenthesis was the name of a philanthropic organization such as Send a Kid to Camp, Embrace Foundation, Search and Care, Inc., and so on. The pictures were installed on top of blueprints made from my earlier drawings, ones that I thought of as interesting but dead ends. They were placed behind the self-portraits because that is where they belonged. I would love to revisit that earlier work. So much of it seems absorbed into my being now. I wonder if I can remember what I was thinking then?

MC: Slavoj Zizek has noted that virtual reality shows that our own "real" reality has taken on the over-lit, abstract contours of the virtual, symbolic world. I was considering the color, light, and flat space in your paintings in relation to that notion. Do you think it applies to your work?

LR: I think the discussion of virtual reality has an interesting overlap with the discussion of realism and neo-realism, especially when talking about color, light, and space. Your question makes me recall a story about Antonioni. In one of his films, he had a real forest painted so that it would look more real on film. I think filmmakers who are using digital photography like Harmony Korine and Lars von Trier are interesting in that confusion of the artificial and the real as well.

I used to think a lot about virtual reality when I was making the early drawings, in terms of artificial landscapes versus natural ones … Smithson again. The things I think of as a new architecture—satellite systems, cellular phones, the Internet—really also function as landscape, and this creates artistic content. I am sitting on a rather isolated Greek island right now, but I can make a phone call at nearly every point on the island, check my e-mail, receive FedEx packages from New York, and I am seeing the deeply unsettling daily reports of what is going on in the Middle East not so far away from where I am. Which landscape is more real to me? It is difficult to say, and they certainly inform each other.

MC: The black-and-white palette you used in the recent self-portraits series seemed like quite a formal break with your previous multi-hued paintings. Is there an emotional signification to those grey tones or, if not, how did you decide to work that way?

LR: That series came about, as they often do, when two separate but somehow incomplete ideas came together and fit in a really solid way. I first thought about black-and-white paintings after I saw some work of mine in a black-and-white photograph of my studio published in a magazine. I was intrigued with the way they looked. Then I made one black-and-white painting called Pleasantville—probably one of the most direct title references I've made as the movie plays with black and white versus color—to try out the format, but never felt that the piece made it beyond a casual idea that needed further elaboration.

Then part two in the development was that I curated a show in a gallery space that I ran for three years in Vienna. The show was called The Image Is Gone, which was a title put out by Marc Bijl as part of a concept for me to respond to in putting together the show. Partly because you are not supposed to do it and also because I wanted to see what would happen if I did, I included myself in the show with a piece that was literally a picture of myself painted in black and white and because it made sense in the context of the other artists in the show.

I took a snapshot of that painting while it was sitting on a wooden floor. It just looked so strange and there was just something that was so compelling about this little painting. I had made four other tiny ones at the same time and they were so incredibly intimate. The color ones I made just before did not have the same power at all. I had to know if this dichotomy between the works was about the scale or the color.

I experimented with some shots of myself in this process and, somehow, every time, the color pieces ended up looking self-deprecating. For example, I tried to put myself in the position of a figure in The Mad Whirl who is putting a bunch of food in her mouth, a particularly vulnerable moment to be

photographed. The work seemed a little embarrassing. In the experimentation, I learned a lot about representing yourself and also about certain limitations that I set up in the social reading of my work. In the black-and-white painting, I might somehow look older or younger, but in general making them almost felt like trying on a bunch of outfits before going out to dinner. In the end, they look like much more emotional works to me than almost anything that I have made in color.

MC: At your recent lecture at Cooper Union in New York, you mentioned that the early self-portraits had been given spurious titles like The Make A Wish Foundation to belie the impossibility of identity. Could you talk a little more about that?

LR: I have always hated a certain idea that people, mainly non-artists, seem to have about art: the assumed relationship between the person making it and the person viewing it—that art making is about being vulnerable, or soul-baring, or truth-telling in any sense of the word; that an artist is a different kind of person than anyone else in the world, living by a different set of rules. But to flat out reject the possibility that making a work of art can be a way to connect with another person is not any kind of solution to this issue either.

A work of art is a container for content, but that content will always change. The content of my work is different for me than it is for any viewer and I expect will continue to be a changing thing. Style is style. It is my personal style of making art, and I cannot step outside of that to say what it means. It is somehow an inadequate answer, but that is it.

I can however control certain things about the way it is seen. There is this object, which ends at the physical edges of the work, but can be affected by things like the title, a related series, where it is exhibited, how it reproduces, and what is said about it. If there is specificity about structures inside the physical edges of the work such as in the surface, line, and level of craft, then this specificity should be mutually reinforced by structures that exist outside of the work. These things can at least leave enough clues that there is a person behind these decisions. Not really like leaving a message in a bottle, but more like Sirk's use of the windowpane in the funeral scene of Imitation of Life. Maybe that can read as the author feeling left out or otherwise separated from the action. But in fact, it reclaims authority. The author is the one who made the action in the first place. That is just my reading of Sirk's method of achieving a balance with his audience and with his subject matter.
One of my ways of achieving a balance in my life is to put things in a painting that may be personal. This is the connection, by way of the camera, to my life. And then the subject, that image, is processed by my style and fit into my structure. Sometimes I choose an image because I don't understand why it means nothing to me and sometimes I choose an image because it means more than it should. So when I make a painting of something my style does not automatically either neutralize or bring to life, it's because what it does for me is different every time. In any case, my process fixes a perceived imbalance in my relationships to other people. This allows me to function as a person capable of building strong relationships with the people that I want to do this with. I think that this is why I go toward self-portraits when I am stuck. What this style means for other people, is hard for me to say. But I came to it by looking at the world around me, so it should be pretty easy for people to take something from it for themselves.

Interview conducted via e-mail July–December 2006.