

Adam Straus in conversation with Gail Gregg

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G.G. *Sublimis Interruptus* will be opening at an almost apocalyptic moment in world history, as our government contemplates declaring war in the Middle East. How did the white noise of current events affect you as you made work for this new show? Is the emergency signal in S.O.S. a personal call of distress?

A.S. *I would say I'm feeling pretty unsafe, and I certainly think some of the paintings suggest a certain danger. But the work has almost always contained some kind of threat. If anything, there are more paintings in this show that suggest an escape from these tensions – which can also be looked at as a response...There have been several S.O.S. paintings through the years. I've always liked the idea that it's just a light shining in the distance, but by titling it, "SOS" it suggests a narrative. (And I love the fact that S.O.S. means "save our souls.")...When you look at these past 60 years, it's a very different period in our human history. Before, the end of the world was seen as something God would impose, or nature. But in our lifetime, it's become something we could actually accomplish. (Accomplish probably is not such a good word...)*

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G.G. I've often thought of your paintings as "postcards from hell" – like those hand-colored cards from the 30s that idealize a diner or car dealership or suburban home in spite of the subject. Why do you choose to present your tough messages in a setting of idealized beauty?

A.S. *In the '80s beauty became a really bad word – and it's very true, beauty is very individual. Also, it had something to do with post-Marxist class theory. But with the landscape, there really are certain things that are beautiful to most people – that's why they go to the Grand Canyon, to Yosemite, to the ocean... Migration – that came from a lot of different things, from these people dying of thirst coming across the desert from Mexico, the migrations in the Middle East, and so on. It comes from a Caspar David Friedrich kind of sunset. And it has to do with this contrast between the beautiful and the tragic, along with a kind of punchline. You have to have it beautiful at first, before it has a real effect... I love the idea of a painting that draws you into it, but then you think, "Oh shit, maybe I should get out of here!"*

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G.G. Donald Kuspit mentioned in a recent catalogue essay that your pictures remind viewers that landscape no longer is "uplifting," but instead has become a "symbol of futility." Other critics have commented that the isolation and dread portrayed in your work is also coupled with a kind of optimism. So, Adam, which do you feel – futility or optimism?

A.S. *I would say both but not always at the same time; I've always thought that just the idea of attempting to make art has a certain degree of optimism. In terms of the paintings, I see them as ambiguous. There's very often that sense of futility, but there also is a kind of comical optimism – a waiting for Godot. Like the desert in Migration: it could be too late, or it could just be Arizona... I want some mystery – for me, as well as for whomever looks at them... I have a certain passion for living and completely love the magic of art, and I hope that comes through in the paintings. However, I have to say, I'm not always overly impressed with the human species. I feel like environmentally we're not doing enough and that we're in worse shape than most people realize. And with our present great leader, we're running backwards instead of moving forward. We seem to think that Armageddon will only happen instantaneously instead of being a slightly slower process, say 200–300 years. We've also got increased tensions with nuclear issues; we're in much more jeopardy than we were three or four years ago and I think part of this jeopardy is caused by our current administration.*

G.G. Kuspit also described the figures in your paintings as, "little people looking for big miracles." Talk to me about these lonely souls who populate your landscapes... and, by the way, are miracles still possible?

A.S. *Some of them, like the man in Water Carrier, are futile heroes, guys trying to put a band-aid on a gaping wound. Some of it is about always having loved being in these places where nobody is around. Even as a child I'd go off in a tiny boat in the bay... I've always been involved with that change of scale, even when I was making sculpture; I made these*

big panels with these small things happening on them. That has a similarity to the tiny figure in the vast landscape... I want to get people into the picture. It's a kind of Don Quixote belief in the picture, and it works that way for me. I can go to the Met and look at the Hudson River Luminists or the Impressionists and go into the picture. But I'm not sure that a static picture has a lot of draw in our culture anymore. I mean Church used to be able to charge 50 cents to look at one of his new pictures. We certainly would pay \$9.50 to see a movie – but would you pay that now to see one picture?

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G.G. You've often said that you're a self-taught painter, as you studied black and white photography rather than painting in art school. What lessons are you learning about your craft these days?

A.S. The first paintings I did were with black enamel house paint – because I'd been a housepainter. Slowly I started getting tubes of oil paint; I just did it until I figured out how to do it. Moving to New York was unbelievable in terms of learning about painting, being able to go to the Met and try to figure out how the paintings I loved were made. I recently learned from the Gamblins, the paintmakers, that one of the ways the Luminists got their glow was by using flake white, a semi-transparent paint made with lead which allows light to pass through the layers and literally get trapped. (Today of course it's lead free.) This was a revelation, but probably something I should have already known. You pick up these little bits as you do it; every artist is self-taught that way. Remember Woody Allen's story about the guy who invented the sandwich? He worked for years with two pieces of bread and couldn't figure it out. Then he worked with two pieces of bologna, then a piece of bologna and a piece of bread. Finally, after years, he came up with a sandwich...

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G.G. The handmade lead frames you make for your paintings have been described as turning your pictures into precious objects, adding gravitas to your content or memorializing the landscape. What is your intent in surrounding your images in their heavy lead borders?

A.S. All of the above. I think lead is a beautiful material but I've always loved the way it can be both toxic and protective – kind of like technology. Also, since I'm dealing with illusionistic space in most of my paintings, I want something around the picture to work as a window – a traditional sense of the frame with an untraditional material and look.

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G.G. Your new pictures transport us to several different landscapes – the desert mesa, the oceanside, the mountaintop. Yet you work and live in an urban setting. Can you tell us about that dichotomy?

A.S. Elements of those pictures are an escape for me, from the harshness of the city. The seascapes are things I see when I go out to Long Island... I paint from pictures I find in the newspaper; I work out ideas I find all over the place. When I first started painting the mountains, I kept seeing them in ads. You know, like car ads where the SUV has made it up to the top of Everest...

G.G. A related question: you're about to move to the beach. Will living inside the landscape you paint have an effect on your work?

A.S. I don't know; I joke that I'll start painting cityscapes when I get out in nature. But I painted the first landscapes when I was living in north Florida; they involved the lonely roads in the South with McDonalds, Gulf or Texaco signs sticking up from the horizon. I think I'll probably end up painting more of the landscape in Long Island. It's really influenced so much of the last few years, the light out in Montauk, the dunes, the water.

G.G. When you're suffering a spell of painter's block, where do you turn for inspiration?

A.S. I work on sketches; At times, I just push paint around and throw things away until something happens. In the past, I would go to the Met. And everytime I leave town, I come back with images in my head that I'm excited about using. Traveling has always been one of the best ways for me to get inspired.

G.G. Similarly, who are the artists who have inspired you throughout your 20 years of making pictures? I keep finding references to Ryder, the Luminists, Magritte, de Chirico, Monet...

A.S. *That's a good list, but starting out in photography, the people who inspired me early on were people like Duane Michals, Jerry Uelsemann, Ralph Meatyard and Clarence Laughlin. Michals was one of those change-of-life, miraculous realizations; he showed me what art can do. I loved his use of narrative, poetry – but also the humor and mystery in his sequences... I started looking at the Hudson River School really closely just in the last eight years, since I've been in New York. Also, during that first New York winter, with the gray and the short days, I looked at the Impressionists in a completely different way. I'd just want to walk into their paintings... I've made a lot of paintings based on the work of other artists – like Caspar David Friedrich with Man Pointing to Something Outside of the Picture and Migration. Then there were paintings like Mc Rothko, Franz Kline's Window, and the group of paintings that were inspired by Monet's waterlilies. It's been a way to learn from the paintings that I think are great; it's a way to almost attempt to do it – but at the same time to make it my own. When I was doing the waterlily paintings, we went to France and looked at every waterlily painting we could find. Then when I was finished, I went back to MOMA, which had one of the waterlily murals up –and went, "Oh damn, you didn't even come close. They're simply just amazing paintings."*

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G.G. Your pictures often contain references to questions of science. Are you a student of ecology?

A.S. *I studied biology and zoology in college, and grew up studying marine biology, because I was so involved with the ocean. I dove all over the place, scuba-dived, fished... Recently I read The End of Nature, A Walk in the Woods and Fast Food Nation – all of which involve ecology and the landscape. I read the newspaper, articles from different publications. I pick it up from all over the place. A lot of the ideas have come from just watching the effect we've had on the landscape.*

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G.G. I see in your new paintings a fresh excitement with paint itself – and with beauty. Several of them, such as Dune in Fog, seem to stand aside from social or political comment and allow themselves to be experienced simply as beautiful places. I'm wondering if you aren't flirting with parking your social conscience for a while and luxuriating instead in painting the "magic" and "mystery" of nature that you long have admired...

A.S. *Yes, They're much more involved with an escape. But if you think of reflections, opposites, contrasts – a picture that is beautiful, peaceful, and quiet like Dune in Fog – can also reflect how far we live from that experience, especially in the city. I think the social content is just becoming more subtle at times. I always hope that the older I get, the more I'll understand subtlety.*

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G.G. Is it possible for a contemporary artist to work without alluding to our social or political situation, to make objects for purely aesthetic or formal reasons?

A.S. *Oh, God, yeah. I don't think art should be one way or the other. I've always thought the most important thing is freedom. When I started doing these landscapes with nothing going wrong in them like Dune In Fog or Long Island Moonrise it was a challenge to leave them alone, to leave them subtle. They really were primarily about that desire to go back to that place. But then the framing added a tension, a containment that could be part of the interruptus in Sublimis Interruptus.*

G.G. You once ran for political office in Florida. Do you feel that artists are too aloof from the world? Do we have an obligation to be more engaged?

A.S. *What bothers me much more than artists being aloof is America's lack of involvement in the political process. National elections are decided by a minority. The [Florida] Senate campaign was this joke that grew into my getting more votes than the difference between the two other candidates. I did it because at the time there were a lot of artists around who were thinking of themselves as political artists. To be political, you have to get into that arena; Mapplethorpes' and Serranos' pictures only became political when they got censored; before that, they were social pictures. I wanted to do*

something that was truly political. It was probably my best sculpture – it was in the arena, it made fun of it, and a whole lot of articles went out on it. I was hoping to inspire other artists to do something like that. I didn't even do it with that much energy – but just doing it raised hell. It made me realize you could really do a lot by being a write-in candidate...Making social images within the art world doesn't affect society really; I think it's kind of grandiose to think it affects political thinking. I have no illusion that George Bush is going to see one of my paintings and all of a sudden become more of an environmentalist. If he would, I'd give him one.

G.G. You're about to bring another new creation into the world – a baby. This is a joyful time for you and Nicole, but your happy event will be occurring in a larger atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty. How are you maintaining hope when your work – as Craig Adcock once said -- reminds us that, "all is not well with the future"?

A.S. Well, I doubt there was ever a time when bringing a child into the world didn't create some uncertainty and anxiety – but, yes, I worry. I wish we were giving our children a better, more stable world. And I'm constantly intrigued with this use of the term "family values" by people who don't seem to be thinking about their children's futures at all... But, Nicole and I both think of this baby as a miracle. I was brought up with the idea of questioning, of doing your bit, however small, to make the world a better place. That to me is a very hopeful idea. And I know we will bring up our child with these ideals. It's the ripple effect, like what Leonardo said, "When a bird jumps off a tree it moves the earth."