

**AZ: Studio Interview with Jill Moser by Milos Zahradka Mairorana  
Fall 2019**



**A**

Milos Zahradka Mairorana: Jill, I really love your painting *Tracking* that I see here, it's a perfect opening piece, can you talk a little about it in relation to the "A" of Action.

Jill Moser: Sure, *Tracking* was part of my show *Play/Replay* at the Lennon Weinberg gallery, paintings whose grounds were screen printed at Brand X Editions on top of which I painted. This is the dog chasing its tail continuum in my work. The origin of the screened image was in a painting called "Screen Test" (all these works have filmic references). Photos of details of the painting became the prints that became the grounds of the paintings. I love hybridizing different processes — having different methods of making inform each other.

I originally wanted to be a filmmaker, my earliest works were super 8 and 16 mm movies. I was first drawn to 70s avant-garde cinema and its compelling non-narrative way of seeing, the camera recording and describing at the same time, and then became curious to see if paintings could do the same. Was it possible to make "still forms" that would retain the movement of cinema? The title *Tracking* refers to a tracking shot, which in cinema is any shot where the camera follows backward, forward or moves alongside the subject being recorded. I am interested in an image that is never fixed, that is always caught in the act of becoming. In many ways my paintings are the product of the stuttering gesture, somewhere between action and stillness.

M: Gilles Deleuze has much to say about the act of becoming in painting, in his book on Francis Bacon he speaks of rhythm and hysteria, the diagrammatic unfolding of the painting; not only does montage or music have a rhythm but also painting; to some extent a painting can play itself out, it can act out.

J: Yes, painting has a rhythm. What interests me about the connection between the moving image and painting is the power of what can be called meditative viewing, the metonymic charge of images where the "sense" of the work is generated by the images themselves without an underlying narrative structure. Meaning is made through aesthetic affinity. I think of this viewing experience as a surrender to the logic of the visual. Aren't we always trying to get *there* as artists? The gesture is a generative act, as Twombly beautifully said: "The line is the feeling, from a soft thing, a dreamy thing, to something hard, something arid, something lonely, something ending, something beginning."

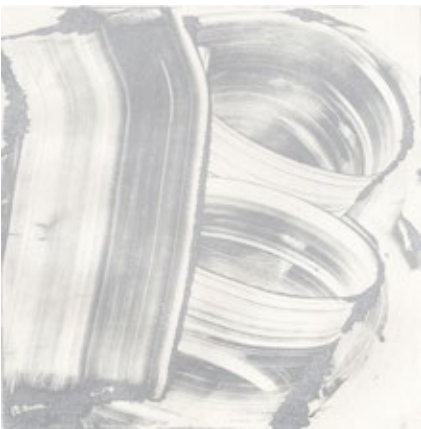
M: Let's speak a little more about this surrender to the visual; in the same statement Twombly says: "I am experiencing something frightening in that state, I am also going." What is "that" state? Can we describe this state in rational terms or is it closer to a mystical experience?

J: That state is something all artists know, and long for. It is something very hard to describe but we know it when we find it. A longing for that place, that flow, when you've tapped into the innate logic of your work.

M: I believe Deleuze calls that “innate logic” the diagram. It is something that emerges out of that nameless “state.” He calls the diagram a “germ of order.” Isn’t this what the artist is waiting for all the time? The artist waits for it but is unaware that he is creating this germ of order, it is an unconscious process. Maybe what the ancients call the rapture of the Muses. The Greeks knew that they had created the gods so they must have known that the Muses are just another name for the unconscious process of creation. In this respect the job of aesthetics is nothing but the attempt to name this moment of grace, perhaps what Kant so tritely called “the freeplay of the faculties.”

J: Rapture and grace have very different meanings and I’m not sure either is right. The image gives back to you what I think of it as a logic of its own making. Was it there already? Is the logic secondary to the act?

M: We are venturing into very uncertain territory. Reminds me of when Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals* says something like the “I” of subjectivity is nothing but the abstraction of grammar, an illusion of identity fabricated by syntax. In this respect Nietzsche is approaching Daoism! “The Tao that can be named is not the real Tao.” Anyways, let’s move on to our next letter. B for becoming, no, too predictable, let’s think of another word.



## B

J: This whole new series is called *Borrowed Light*, so borrowing.?

M: Yes, that is a great word for art. Tell me more about “borrowed light.”

J: Borrowed light is light coming from somewhere else. It’s also about borrowing ideas, stealing whatever we need to illuminate what we are working on. How do you think Twombly does that?

M: Well, Twombly is certainly illuminated by borrowed light. He puts many elements together. He has often been described as a classicist, which is really surprising to me because besides the titles Dionysus, Orpheus, Apollo, etc, there is really nothing classical about his work. I chose to write about Twombly because he is so enigmatic and I can learn so much from him, from his chaos. Form and content enter a very strange kind of contamination. A British critic once described his work as para-painting, nonetheless I believe the most intelligent comment on his work is in Barthes catalogue essay “The Wisdom of Art” he talks of the “bait of signification,” Twombly’s paintings are a kind of tease, he is playing with high culture without necessarily revering it, Barthes also talks about Twombly’s “performance of culture.” I don’t know if I am more in love with Twombly or Barthes’ commentary.

J: Barthes is great on Twombly. Twombly’s teasing citations of classical culture in words and images seem to me in part an homage. They seem neither pompous nor arrogant but part of the bait he is offering, the bait that leads you into the event of his painting. They are gestures that take on meaning in the way that Judith Butler talks of gesture, as something that is both citation and event, between language and performance (the way that I think of and use gesture in my own work).

M: Yes, he is both citational and performative, Twombly recaptures “culture” in his performance of culture. Simon Critchely speaks of being inauthentic as a degraded form of authenticity. In many ways Twombly is doing a huge service to Culture (with a big C). When can we witness Orpheus in such a violent and sexy way? Orpheus is alive and well.

J: Ok, next letter, what shall we pick? C for culture?



## C

M: Yes, that ties in perfectly. What kind of world or culture is behind your work? A certain time period, movement, scene, etc?

J: My work is very much located in this time and space. It deliberately references our current time period. The work has a lot to do with the current political climate, with the ugliness of our time, it has to do with the importance of marking affirmative work, life-giving work. In many ways my work is a survival response to the misery of our times, especially in the United States.

M: That is beautiful. The political implications of art are always there I guess even though they might not be apparent. What about the culture of dance, is that present in your work?

J: Absolutely, it is another gestural form of art I particularly love, see echoes of in my own work and learn from. In dance gestures are literally bodied forms, asserting relationships and meaning through movement.



## D

M: Let's move on to D, D for deconstruction. One could say there is a deconstructive element in your work, could you speak of the act of deconstruction?

J: I am not sure I am deconstructing, perhaps instead I am suggesting a construction. As artists we are always taking things apart, others' works of art to figure out how they construct their images. I am suggesting components that could become a form so in that sense I am offering deconstructed fragments.

M: Certainly deconstruction is a very fraught term, especially with the superficial popularization of Derrida's philosophy. Sometimes this "deconstruction" is nothing but aimless aggression. What I see in your work is a certain deconstructive force but it remains "together" there is a certain gentle embrace that will not come undone.

J: Thank you. More than deconstruction I am interested in the discursive line, a line that talks about itself of how it's made. There is a lot of that in Twombly, the awkward line, *gauche*. Twombly's lines are alive.

M: That is clear from Twombly's own artist statement where he says that each line possesses an innate history, each line is its own actualization. Barthes says something beautiful in this regard when he speaks of the truth of color in the smudge and the truth of the pencil in the wobbly line.



## E

M: Ok, let's move on to a top seller, E for erotics.

J: I find it a really perfect way to describe what happens, how one relates to a work of art at a certain level, what an image can do, what it can offer, the bodily charge of an image. Maybe this is the "rapture of the Muses"!

M: I think it is a word we should use more, and should not be afraid to use with art. In a way we are still recovering from Kant's aesthetics. Kant denies the erotic component in a work of beauty in favor of formal agreeableness, disinterested contemplation. Erotics is what attracted me to Twombly's work. I think it's highly charged work. It's

seductive in its play of forms and the writing itself, the gesture, as Barthes says in his essay is the *surplus of the body*, so there is a lot of body there. There's an exuberance of life which involves you. The moment it involves you is bodily but it is not necessarily sexual, often, especially in America, the erotic is confounded with the pornographic. Porno is the antinomy of the erotic, the erotic requires distance.

J: Maybe Twombly takes you where Kant doesn't want you to go, into the emotional realm of things, the bodily emotional realm of things. The origin of emotion being movement—the Latin base of the word. That whole embodiment of feeling and the pleasure that's in that: the pleasure and also the charge of it.

M: Charge is a good word. For Kant artwork should not incite if not cerebrally.

J: How sad.

M: How sad, really. Why would anybody waste their time with art without any bodily emotional component?

J: Art without giving pleasure, meaning it should stay pretty, in its place.

M: Yes it should stay as an ornament, like one of those fake books in an IKEA display. You mentioned earlier the pleasure in drawing as written about by Jean-Luc Nancy. How does the pleasure of making art relate to erotics?

J: Yes, there's the erotics of making and the erotics of viewing and I think they work in tandem. They have to charge each other. Nancy's book is called *The Pleasure in Drawing*—it goes both ways.

M: So you're saying there's an erotics in the act of drawing?

J: Yes, there's this love, it's in Twombly. It's the evocation of the stuff of making as the image comes into being. As you know well as an artist there's the pleasure of making art but also the frustration, the challenge—the whole range of emotions (as I read in that Twombly quote), it's all wrapped up in the erotics of it.

M: The erotic exists in these tensions.

J: The frissions. For me in this new work I'm loving the erotics of color. The charge of color relationships, the optics. An erotics of optics?  
Like in that one in which the figure appears and disappears and vibrates.

M: Colors possess a charge or better colors *are* the charge.

J: And operate in the whole spectrum of emotions. That's one of the things that's happening in this new work. As the figure asserts a certain character the colors reflect that. For instance, the recessive quiet of this figure is reflected in the closely aligned colors and tones I'm using versus what's solar and electric about the cacophony of the one next to it. Or what happens in the one next to that which uses a play of compliments to vibrate against each other.

M: What medium are you using in these new paintings?

J: The drawings are done with gouache but in the paintings I'm using Flashe, a highly pigmented vinyl acrylic—saturated and matt like the gouache but also light absorbing. It is a crazy hypnotic thing to use—the color and tone shifting as it dries like no other paint I've ever used. You never know what it's going to do. It reveals itself in so many ways, it's incredible. It's also highly absorbent. The paintings on linen have a Flashe ground and the initial figure is done with acrylic but then I use oil because I can't achieve these lines without using oil. Oil has a malleability and range, from opacity to translucency I haven't been able to achieve with acrylics. And I love its sensuality.



## F

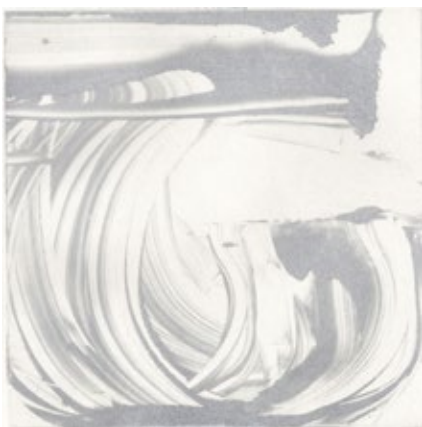
M: let's move on to F. I'll surprise you with this one—Friendship.

J: Oh, that's sweet. Friendship amongst who, what?

M: Friendship, comradeship—Are your friends involved in your creative process?

J: Sure -most of my friends are practitioners of the arts in some fashion—writers, painters, sculptors, designers, dancers, scholars, critics. I've done a lot of collaborations with friends or people who became friends. Printmakers too. I love that communal sense of working- giving and receiving ideas. I think art making is about building communities. It's one of the excitements of living in a city like NY. I was just in LA where

it's not as easy to move around. The ease of getting to see shows, lectures—it's a city that allows for that even though it's becoming increasingly difficult to live here economically. Community is huge: community of ideas, images. Sharing ideas is essential. It all nurtures work.



## G

M: Ok, let's move on to G, I choose the word ground.

J: How do you define ground? Are you talking about pictorial ground, physical ground?

M: Ground as the ground of the image.

J: Breeding ground?

M: Breeding ground is also good but more like ground in a painting.

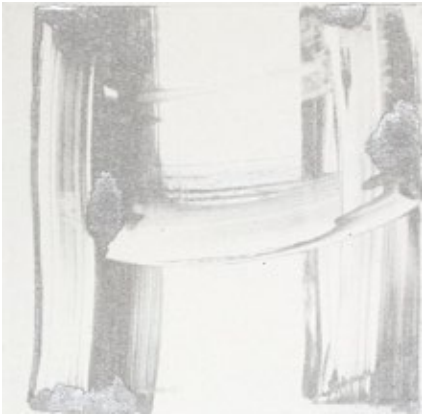
J: You know how I wanted F to be "frame", for me the ground of the image has a lot to do with the physical surface of the work as well as its parameters. I'm always flirting with the actual edge of the work. The actual edge of a sheet of paper for me is a more conceptual fictive edge than the edges of paintings which for me are more physical. This is why when I went to make paintings from these drawings I first worked on cradled wood, to explore the objecthood of the image. That physical edge of a painting is a different frame for the work, a different container, edge to work with and against. So those are the parameters but the actual surface comes from drawing on hot press paper and wanting a similar surface to paint on. A smoothness but also a ground that is both absorbent and resistant—a ground that records (has a memory, tracks the history of making) while allowing for a certain gymnastics of marking.

M: Have you ever worked with a surface that repels the mark?

J: Like a medium that resists? Now why would I do that? Why would anyone? Do you mean like plastics?

M: yes

J: I've worked on plastics but ones that take ink and paint as plates for prints. You can see excerpts of them in my collages. And when I worked with the poet Major Jackson I painted on sheets of clear plastic we together combined with his text. But why would you ever use materials that don't adhere. The frustration of that!



## H

M: H, is a hard one.

J: Hand.

M: that makes me think of the Palmer method and the training of a good writing subject.

J: I'm very interested in the hand being present in my work. The reason for doing the *play, replay* paintings was to play the hand-painted off of a machined image. I also did this in the Cycle X prints and in the artists book I did with the language poet Charles Bernstein. I'm interested in how we think of handmade marks, how they reveal themselves and whether they reveal themselves truthfully. So much of my mark making looks like it is spontaneous but then it's not. It asks "What is the hand and what is sleight of hand"?

M: the performance of writing, of subjectivity.

J: yes, what and whose hand is performing?

M: this is interesting. The idea of mastery of form that seems spontaneous, personal. But is spontaneity an effect that is created by rigorous practice? I don't know. Let's linger on the hand. I love hands. The renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno said that the hand is the divine organ unlike most philosophers who thought of the divine organ as being the eye, tied to vision and knowledge. Plato and Hegel thought that vision was the highest sense, theory in Greek means a certain way of seeing. Bruno says every act that makes the human being human is achieved through the hand: making, building, holding, working, loving, etc.

J: It is essential to how we build our world.

M: our houses, our relationships. We couldn't have deep relationships without touch. Digital relationships are not relationships.

J: so touch, haptics. H could have been haptics. It's the haptics I deeply care about in my work, that there is this sense of touch. The indexical play of haptics, how it tells.

M: the gesture is telling you something

J: the erotics of the haptic.

M: Yeah, that's great!



## I

M: Ok then "I" will be intimacy

J: Intimacy in terms of what?

M: In terms of making art, in terms of your relationship to the process of art making.

J: Do I think of it as an intimate act?

M: As you said earlier in relation to the quoted Twombly statement- this letting go, this *I'm also going*. I think he is describing an intimate moment.



J: Yes, he says "Something frightening in that state because I am also going"  
Experiencing something frightening, which means something unexpected. He's referring to an intimacy in which one forms a kind of trust with one's work. Trust—letting the work take you where it needs to go. The kind of trust one has with a lover, the trust of getting somewhere you haven't been. The process of working is one of trust and intimacy.



**J**

M: J for joke

J: ah do we go to Freud?

M: You mention the word play a lot.

J: maybe joke as in unexpected?

M: For Freud the joke reveals the unconscious more than any other human activity except dreaming of course.

J: But it's the telling of a joke. Do paintings reveal in that way? Jokes are taking the expected and turning, subverting it. Why joke?

M: Because in the beginning when you talked about your painting *Tracking* and the dog chasing its tail, there is something slightly humorous about that in that a tautological situation can be seen as a comical situation. Zizek talks about Willy the Coyote dying but then he keeps coming back, he might have exploded, then in the next frame he is back again just the same – the eternal return has a humorous element to it.

J: like Krazy Kat getting hit on the head over and over.

M: Through repetition something very heavy can become light and vice versa. A joke articulates chance. How do your paintings articulate chance?

J: Maybe it's the sleight of hand in my work—what you're seeing is not really what you are seeing. If looked at quickly my work seems fast, immediate but if looked at carefully you can see something else happening, that there is a doubling over, a play of tempos of making: the fast and the slow, the immediate and the considered, the painted gesture then it's double reiterated in the blot.. But does it make people laugh, that I don't know.

M. Perhaps it exhilarates us like Freud's *Witz*.



**K**

M: On to K, it's up to you.

J: Knockout? Poww! "Does your work throw a punch?"

M: That could be enough—Poww!



## L

J: Line, longing?

M: beautiful, let's do longing

J: ok, to stay with your romanticism. So is Twombly's work longing for some Mediterranean idyll?

M: A place in the sun, a rocky cove, an iced cappuccino, oh Greece...how can we resist? I believe that in Twombly there is a lot of longing for an elsewhere but it's not nostalgia.

J: It's desire. I think longing is linked to desire. Barthes talks about that a lot. It's one of the reasons we make art. I like that Barthesian idea of line shifting from being the object to the subject of desire. I think art making is perpetuated by the longing for the next image. It's what keeps you going. The ideas that propel you to the next. The search.

M: Seeing Twombly's drawings at Gagosian last year I was struck by how they all could have been one continuous work of art, that was absolutely beautiful, its flow. He has said "I paint in waves" and it is purposely an ambiguous statement — he was obsessed with the Mediterranean Sea, and his statement could be "I paint like the waves of the sea."

J: waves are continuous, rhythmic but not always the same. You can count on the repeated action of them.

M: the soothing sound of the sea

J: but also the violence of it.



## M

M: On that sublime of the sea, its beauty and violence, let's move on to the M of monstrous.

J: I'm not sure what that means.

M: *Mosntruo* is a really interesting word, from Latin, in which two different verbs mean different things: *Demonstare* is to demonstrate, while *monstrare* is to present. *Monstrare* is an event, it presents itself strongly without preambles. The word monster in English has negative connotations but originally it meant something which presents itself in full effect, without a framework. In your work would you say the impact of presentation is important?

J: I've been thinking about that since working with you and looking at Twombly — how presence is articulated in work and how the character of line and gesture asserts itself in different ways.



## N

M: What you say makes me think of word nuance for N.

J: I was thinking of numinous

M: Numinous is better, let's do numinous

J: Numinous in thinking about Twombly.



What I think what I was first drawn to in Twombly was his gorgeous ability to conjure imagery out of this suggestive ground —that numinous quality of something teased and not quite formed that he offers. That's something I'm playing with here in *Tracking* and *Vertigo*.

M: So how would you define this numinous quality?

J: Doesn't it come from cloud terminology?

M: Perhaps, something there but not there, barely there

J: Yes, something suggested, vague.

M: Vagueness is a quality. Turner said that vagueness was his strength.

J: I'm always after that—Something whose meaning is not fixed, not nameable

M: makes me think of Derrida's notion of deferment, the instability of the sign  
Something that's destabilized and deferred.

J: That's exactly the quality I want in my work

M: yes that is apparent in your work.



M: Let's move on to my favorite word, Oracular, meaning 'similar to an oracle'  
I thought of that word in relation to the priestess at Delphi, the Pythia. She was a virgin in an underground chamber speaking under the influence of natural gases..you know.

J: And then the male priest would speak for her! Which I found so wrong

M: yes so wrong but there are many examples in history of speaking in tongues, both men and women. I thought of the Pythia in relation to your work, it holds a kind of unknown language. You know they find some kind of rock on some unknown planet with an inscription—it must be a language! Why do humans always need a language?

J: that's cool. I like that. But then I also think about the function of speech, the tempo of speech  
How speech isn't codified the way the forms of the written or sighted language are. I want the tempo of speech in my work.

M: What happens inside of speech makes me think of  
Barthes' intertext—the subconscious of language — Something that is moving around'  
Language is not fixed, there is the movement inside of language

J: Judith Butler's idea of gesture decomposing the speech act, crossing between language and performance

M: I forget who says this: that there's different kinds of speech, like phatic speech, etc — there's always the performance of speech that has a different function than just information. When we speak we are emitting much more than just information.

J: How the Dadaists used that in their Urs poetry—the nonsense of speech



## P

M: You called it. Next word, Performance

J: I always talk about my line being a performative one, meaning a line that is manifest through a performative act but also has a performing function. It performs the image. It's an active line in that sense

M: And you mentioned earlier also "embodied" so in a way the performance embodies, it's not abstract, it's living. The performance in a way entails a body. It gives body to the line that is performing. In a way, the idea takes on a body.

J: corporally?

M: it actualizes the body

J: it has a body unto itself

M: or it takes on a body

J: Paul Klee talked about that

M: Twombly "the line actualizes its own history"

J: that's the indexical quality of a line

M: but more than the indexical, it is not only a reference.

J: I love its duality—to be both object and subject. Line functioning like the camera in avant-guard cinema being both the recorder and describer, record and expression.

M: Merleau-Ponty's idea of the reversible, how he describes the act of painting, maybe quoting Cezanne, that the landscape is painting me. Not just the painter describing the landscape but the landscape inscribing itself on the soul of the painter. M-P also speaks of the flesh of the world, the reversible, not knowing what is the inside and the outside, the touched or the *toucher*.

J: the transmutation that takes place between the two

M: that seems an important theme in your work, the reversible quality of the line

J: It's that great M-P passage: "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working actual body, not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movements.



J: That's the heart of the matter

M: Yes, It's what he calls the chiasm, the exchange.

## Q

M: Q for question. Do paintings ask questions?

J: I'm fascinated by how paintings defy their form. I love what is always in play in a painting between what is actually there and the imagined, the real and the illusory.

M: So would you call that the questioning of the painting?

J: I think it's the questioning stance of a painting. What are you really looking at? What does it ask you to wrestle with? As a painter what are you wrestling with? There's the bare stupid fact of painting: taking colored earth and the hair of an animal and moving it around on the piece of a fabric. And then there's the wonder of what it conjures

M: And it's never the same thing.

The more I look at these paintings the more I'm looking at the background

The first two hours I was looking at the marks and now I'm looking at the space behind them and there's so much interesting stuff going on in the background..there is a lot of mood in the background.

J: I never think of background like I never think of negative space but it is a ground which has to have as potent a place as the figure. For me the two have to have a co-dependency and a frisson

M: absolutely

J: and there can't be a hierarchy of one over the other

M: the more I look at the painting the more depth I see

J: and what's cool about working on the panels is that their surfaces almost decompose when painted with Flashe—it reads as something soft and almost ephemeral against the hardness of the wood

M: they have a very different depth

J: yes, the nature of painting on wood versus on canvas

M: also goes back to religious icons, working on wood, wood resonates

I don't know what the theology was behind that choice or maybe it was just utility.

## U



M: Our next letter is "U"

J:utilitarian, user?

M: user friendly, that's good. What's your relationship to the public? Do you consider it when you're working?

J: You can't when you're working, you're screwed if you think about your audience when you're working

M: Are you a user-friendly artist?

J: I don't know. Is my work accessible? I think there's something very blatant about my work. Flat footed, obvious in its methods but what I've discovered is that people find how it is made enigmatic, so I'm wrong. I don't want my work to be totally obscure. I want it to be understood. I'm always interested in the range of responses to it.

M: What role does skill play in your work because someone could say as they say about Twombly that it's just.

J: doodling, a kind of deskillling, you think of that in Twombly's work, the left-handedness

I think there's a kind of knowing in my work at this point. If I look at back at what I did then and what

I do now. I don't think what I do is so extraordinary it is just what I do. It would be interesting to see if someone else could do it but really I've never thought about that I don't want my work to be virtuoso. It started to happen in the blue paintings I did in the mid-2000's, they almost became too slick, fetishized, too enamored of their own virtuosity. Too remote from how they were made.

M: It's interesting looking at your handwriting in your notebook and your gestures in your paintings.

J: My "handwriting" in my paintings is probably more decipherable than the handwriting in my sketchbook !

M: Yes, very different, but I see a virtuosity in the confidence of these marks

J: that's just knowing, that's just doing it for a long time

M: We have arrived at the last station "Z"

## Z



M: Z for zebra. Zebras are incredible, their patterns are supposed to create a blurring of vision, especially when there are many of them it makes the predator dizzy. Is your work a little bit of a zebra?

J: Well I love optics  
You can see this work really plays with that

M: is it telling you to look one way and then going another?

J: I think it's asking you to look carefully Asking, what are you really seeing? And then there's the phenomenological act, how your body is involved in looking. I want that. *Tracking* asks that. I'm interested in how the optics of work provokes the viewer to do

that. With the zebra it's a defense mechanism. I'm interested in quite the opposite! I want the seduction of the optical calling you to participate in the making of the image.

M: the sensuousness of looking, the game of optical negations..

J: and the ambiguity in engaged looking. From different distances you get different views.

M: Also different angles, if you think of Holbein's anamorphic skull

J: I do that a lot with the materials I use. For instance, I love using silver for its contradictory qualities. How it shifts between being seen as ephemeral to something obdurate depending on what angle you are looking at it from and where the light hits it. Ghost and presence.

M: the space of complication makes me think of baroque art. It was illusionistic but also deeply philosophical like the memento mori theme. But also the use of gold, reflection, meant to create an environment of displacement but also sensuous richness.

J: the way gold is used in churches for contemplation, to get beyond the corporeal,

M: but at the same time the baroque is very corporeal so it is reaching the transcendent through the corporeal. I think we're done (marimbas)!

J: cha,cha,cha