Patricia Treib by Joe Fyfe

It was Hannah Arendt who wrote of Quixotic fools engaged in self-aggrandizing performances as opposed to the "calm good conscience of some limited achievement."

This fragment of a text by Renata Adler was once pinned to my studio wall. It reassured me that one could discover whatever one wanted by making art—including a quantity of reasonableness.

Patricia Treib's paintings are very smart in a similar, calming way. Beginning around 2009, I started to see her works in various places and noted them. That's not nothing; it's something. I see a lot of work and regularly go to galleries, but this mostly involves doing more resisting than noting: there is so much work that asserts itself but has too little to say once it has your attention.

A few years ago, Treib and I exhibited together (along with a few other artists) in the short-lived Golden Gallery on Mott Street. When I was introduced to Patricia, we made plans to exchange studio visits. Soon after, these visits began. They have continued and are an important part of my life.

During our first conversation, I remember being pleasantly surprised to discover that her paintings are always done in one single day. To me, this evidenced her awareness of the importance of two things: a generalized emphasis—meaning that the whole surface addresses the viewer at once—and an airiness. I consider these two elements the touchstones of painting.—*Joe Fyfe*

JOE FYFE You're from a town on Lake Michigan?

PATRICIA TREIB I'm from Saginaw, in the middle of the state.

JF It's a northern place.

PT Yes, that's true. I always thought of it as northern; I never identified it as Midwestern. But where I'm from is not very beautiful—

JF Is it cold in the winter?

PT Very cold.

JF Like cold as hell?

PT (*laughter*) Not as devastatingly cold as Chicago can be.

JF You say it's not a nice-looking area. Why?

PT There can be beauty to all different types of landscapes, but Saginaw is just very flat. It's a postindustrial landscape. The city's population has halved since the '70s and '80s. It's really falling apart.

JF And you lived there your whole life?

PT Well, when I was around five, my mom wanted us to live in the country, so she and my father decided to get a place that was about a half hour outside of Saginaw. It was farm country, really isolated. We had this double life—we would live out there on weekends, and during the week we commuted to city schools. Both my parents worked in the city. Then we would drive back at night in the dark. I have so many memories of just being in the car.

We moved back to the city when I was twelve. My older brother was turning sixteen, and I have a younger brother as well. My mother was worried that we were too isolated and antisocial, and that it wasn't good to be away from all of our potential friends. Which was true, even though it was so idyllic, and I loved having time alone and running around barefoot. That period was important for me. When we moved back to the city, everything changed.

JF I lived on Staten Island until I was thirteen, and we also had this place in the Adirondacks that my father built. It was a six-hour drive, and we drove up there almost every weekend because he wanted to get away. Most of the memories I like from my childhood are in the Adirondacks. Your mother was a teacher?

PT Yeah, she was an elementary school teacher.

JF And your father was in the repair business.

PT He was a clock repairman. He started a business in Saginaw called The Clock Shop. He loved antiques. He was technically minded and liked figuring out mechanical things, but there was also an aesthetic aspect to it. He had many different types of clocks: cuckoo clocks, Kit-Cat clocks with moving eyes, and some gorgeous nineteenth-century clocks. There was a cacophony of different styles and time periods. I loved being in the shop.

JF He chose work that he enjoyed.

PT Looking back on it, his shop was my first experience of an artist's studio. It was a place where he did what he loved, a workshop that was tactile and visual. I didn't know any artists in Saginaw, so I think my father's clock shop was my main model.

JF I'm projecting this onto your work—when you were there, Saginaw's past was almost more pronounced than its present.

PT It was already on its decline. I became more sensitive to that because, when I was very young, my father occasionally organized estate sales. There were a couple of instances when we got to see the estate before the sale would begin. Seeing those objects from a different era gave me an idea of a Saginaw that wasn't there anymore. Being around my father and his work stimulated an interest in things from other time periods, in objects as time capsules and markers of particular times.

JF As-of-yet uncategorized cultural signifiers. I guess there were lots of churches in Saginaw. Did you go to church?

PT I did. I was raised Catholic.

JF What do you think about that stuff?

PT What do I think? I mean, it really formed me. I can't imagine not having been raised Catholic. I felt that everything was in relationship to those teachings. I even went to a Catholic school for a couple years, but my mom pulled me out because there was this ex-nun who was quite critical of me, and my mom said, "Enough of this." We found a group of schools that were focused on the arts and sciences, from elementary through high school, and were completely publicly funded. I feel incredibly fortunate to have had that education. It helped me to realize from an early age that I wanted to go into art.

JF Early age?

PT Around eleven or twelve I became very serious about art. Like I said, I didn't know any actual artists. But I

67 *Housecoat*, 2016, oil on canvas, 66 × 50 inches. Images courtesy of the artist.

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(i) *Frock*, 2016, oil on canvas, 72 × 54 inches. (ii) *Peacock*, 2016, oil on canvas, 66 × 50 inches. (iii) *Delft Icon*, 2015, oil on canvas, 66 × 50 inches. (iv) *Straps*, 2015, oil on canvas, 66 × 50 inches.

knew that I was going to be an artist. I'm grateful to have a mother who told me that I should follow that.

JF Your father must have been okay with it, too.

PT He actually passed away when I was twelve.

JF That must have been hard, at the time.

PT Yeah, and it was right around the time when we had just moved back into the city. It was like starting a completely different life.

JF You actually set about painting?

PT Well, first drawing and a little bit of painting.

JF Did you go to the museum in Detroit at some point?

PT My first experience of going to a museum to see paintings was at about age fifteen, when we took a bus trip to the Art Institute of Chicago where I later went to school. We saw a major Degas retrospective. Having only seen reproductions, it was just overwhelming and so beautiful. And Degas is still a big influence.

JF Did you learn to draw from life? You must have had so much art instruction.

PT Part of the art instruction in high school was drawing from observation. One teacher encouraged us to pick objects that were allegorical and to construct meaning with them. It was about having this personal connection to the object.

JF You were asked to build your own still lifes?

PT Yes. I don't necessarily think about my works allegorically, but I do find that I usually have a perceptual starting point and a personal connection.

JF You're carefully moving forward and taking stock as you go.

PT I like to take small, incremental steps, where one element builds on the one before. It's rare for there to be a major break. There's a slow transition from one thing to the next.

JF Your father was a model then. Through his work, he demonstrated that one must take everything into consideration. I assume you're an avid reader.

PT Yes, reading is extremely important to me. And specific works have been enormously influential. I'm kind of embarrassed to say that I came to reading rather late—I saw a reference to Faulkner in a Godard film, and then I got really into Faulkner, and through Faulkner I found out about Proust. One thing led to the next. I got into nineteenth-century French literature, which complemented my interest in French painting, in Manet and Vuillard, and in photography.

At my arts high school, we published a literary journal of which I was the photo editor. We would take submissions from all different disciplines, decide what was going in, and then I would photograph all the artwork and do the layout. We had a darkroom there, and I started taking photographs.

JF Degas was very influenced by photography.

PT I responded to the seemingly arbitrary cropping or pronounced cuts in Degas's work, and his emphasis on the frame.

I already had a certain inclination toward the edge and the crop, but when I saw his work it just reinforced my interest in framing, in the decisions about what is being framed and how it is being framed. I was interested in street photography, too, but I didn't have much knowledge of what was happening with photography.

JF You had Degas, you had the magazine, you had a camera, you had the darkroom.

PT I was limited to what I was exposed to back then, but once I got to Chicago and the Art Institute, my interests grew exponentially. Going to a school connected to a museum was an incredible luxury. I stayed for three years after I graduated. I was as interested in photography as I was in painting, but then I slowly became most enamored with painting and in a fairly traditional way: to paint what you see, to work from what's in front of you.

JF Just for the sake of shorthand—more like [Philip] Pearlstein's realism as opposed to John Currin's?

PT More like Fairfield Porter.

JF I think you have to be a painter to appreciate Fairfield Porter. Others think they're looking at *New Yorker* covers. So you were directly influenced by Porter?

PT Or Cézanne—just painting that was trying to pay attention to our sense of perception and how that translates through physical material. I was very influenced by Vuillard; he was one of my early loves.

JF More than Bonnard?

PT Both equally. The painting department at the Art Institute is very divided. There's a section with more conservative ideas about the diminishment of the self—the artist receiving something out there and recording it. I saw a connection to certain types of

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photography, where you're just taking something in and minimizing your interpretation of it. I was attracted to the idea of quieting oneself and of letting what is in front of you emerge and take over.

JF So that's the part of this conservative instruction that you responded to?

PT Yes, and maybe it's not that conservative. Maybe they saw that as an essential aspect of being a student—to not impose your point of view. But, consequently, I felt that I arrived at a very decisive point of view, because I had this structure imposed on me—it was kind of related to Catholicism. (*laughter*) I felt that I formed myself in relationship to the imposed restrictions and rules. Getting back to this idea of diminishing yourself and painting what you see—well, of course that's impossible. But that process made me aware of how there is no degree-zero type of naturalism; there's always interpretation, there are always editing and selection.

JF One of the words I use in relation to the way that I work is *passive*. Your relationship to the work that you're doing seems active, but you don't have to enforce your point of view or personality on it in order to get the thing to come alive. It's a receptive way of painting. A lot of painting I see is just too much Y-chromosome, which I associate with being aggressive rather than receptive (which would be X-chromosome, in the original sense). And I think that the reason the Abstract Expressionists drank so much was because they were trying to beat the hell out of themselves to get rid of their Y-chromosome so they could be receptive. That female part, in the traditional sense of the female being receptive, is very important in painting.

PT The structure imposed on me was meant to lessen my interpretation, to make me more receptive. I kind of reacted against that—

JF It sounds to me as if you reacted against it as much as you utilized it.

PT Yeah, it made me aware that anything described in language, in paint, in physical form or otherwise, is a point of view; it's framed and presented, carrying the marks of whoever is speaking. And it's manipulated in a sense. Even though I'm aware that any decision, any move, is an interpretation, a selection, an act of editing, I became drawn to trying to carefully notice and observe what was in front of me—to attempt to pull something out that I would have overlooked. I wanted to be receptive to what was in front of me and to be startled by it.

JF That almost sounds Proustian.

PT Proust is major for my work—in many different ways.

JF At your talk at Wallspace Gallery, I began to understand that you create your paintings through a mimesis of the way memory changes things over time.

PT The way memory changes things?

JF You use certain motifs that are either from a particular still life or from a particular icon. And they're transformed gradually through intermediate works on paper before you decide to make a painting.

PT There's a process of reflecting on it and reflecting on it again.

JF And when you were talking about Proust, I thought, That's a map of what memory does: each time something is remembered, it changes a bit. So when it's ready to be realized as, let's say, a full-fledged memory as opposed to a memory study, you get a painting.

PT Yes, that is very close to how I think about it. There is a correspondence to a process of memory. Every time you remember something, it's not like you're being teleported to the past—you're actually physically experiencing it in the present. It's not the previous memory. It's recreated, it's restructured, and it's a part of the present moment.

JF It's not restructured; it's structured. It's composed.

PT I was struck by Proust's conception of involuntary memory that he contrasts to voluntary memory. He compares voluntary memory to looking through pages of a photo album: Yes, that was me at that time. It's a matter of facts. Involuntary memory, for him, is a physical sensation, a sense perception, smell and taste being the most ephemeral and powerful because they are not conscious, not verbalized. Involuntary memory is not immediate memory but something that seeps in while you're unaware. And if you come across a particular bodily sensation, one that is similar to one experienced in the past, you physically reexperience that past moment. There's an echo, a rhyme between

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those two moments. It's not the past moment or the present moment; it's both and neither. It's this way of collapsing the space between past and present, so it's a pure presence. I feel a real correspondence between Proust's conception of involuntary memory and pictorial space in painting, which has the unique characteristic of being experienced all at once. A pictorial image presents a compression of experienced time, whereas to apprehend a book as a whole you have to reflect on its duration, to hold it together in your mind. For me, the Proustian collapse of time has a resonance with a pictorial space that's happening all at once.

JF It's evocative of an ephemeral sense?

PT I hope to have a certain evocation of something that's ephemeral or transitory.

JF Some painters are able to use color and paint in such a way that more than one of the viewer's senses is being addressed. Reaching the sense of touch by way of vision is one of the things that paintings do—not that I give a damn about defending painting as painting, but—

PT I've never seen painting as isolating vision from the rest of the body—as if that were possible. When you see something, other senses are provoked, especially touch.

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JF I've been reading a lot of Christian Bonnefoi's writings, lately. I share his admiration for Louis Kahn, the architect. After I had read his writings on Kahn, I happened to be in Fort Worth, and I went to see the Kimbell Museum again. It's so obvious after you read Bonnefoi that there's an inside and an outside to that museum. Almost every part of it seems to turn around on itself; inside and outside seem to be in conversation. I see a similar kind of reversibility in your work and the way you articulate this elusive, two-dimensional space—even though a painting is frontal, it addresses its non-frontality.

PT I want the work to appear as if it's about to change or is in the process of shifting. I want there to be moments of ambiguity as to where one form ends and another form begins. A shifting quality as to the points of contact between things, clear assertions of one thing meeting another, but contradiction in terms of them existing all at the same time. There's an absurdity to it.

JF That's an interesting word, *absurdity*. I think there's a part of you that's interested in harmony. There's also unity of the elements, like with Cézanne, where the paint itself modulates. So no matter what kind of painting you're making, it ultimately is going to modulate. And that's where the whole comes from.

 (i) *La Mancha*, 2016, oil on canvas, 74 × 56 inches. (ii) *Poise*, 2016, oil on canvas, 66 × 50 inches.

PT Just by drawing a frame around the elements, you force a relationship, even if it's not a unifying one. I do want dissonance, conflict, things not quite sitting right. But at the same time, I want elements that are very relational. It's not about any one part in isolation, but how one part speaks to the other parts. I want there to be a tension. Dissonance is a type of harmony too—

JF It's modal harmony, like one series of chords. Bonnefoi criticizes contemporary painting for not taking on the Baroque and the dynamics of Picasso, and for relying on an immanence derived from Malevich or Mondrian. You are flirting with baroque energy, and at the same time retaining composure.

PT If there is a figure that emerges, it's from a line that moves through multiple forms. How would you define baroque? I thought it was about an *S* curve, or a dominant movement through the space, one that is beyond any singular figure.

JF Baroque is complicated. (*laughter*) You flirt with its dynamics but then there's calmness, too, islands of repose. Everything is in repose, but then it's not. The single-color, brushed areas are not gestures exactly because they become oddly like objects. They're meditative paintings that flirt with the Baroque. In terms of your color, Pietro Longhi comes to mind.

PT Um . . .

JF The Venetian painter, the one who painted the rhinoceros.

PT Oh, yeah, yeah.

JF Only because he liked dusky plums and powdery jade greens.

PT He had an unusual color sense.

JF Well, even though they're distinctive colors, they don't dominate the composition.

PT In my work, I want a sense of activation where things are slippery and moving, a feeling of immediacy and presence. But this activation stems from something I've sat with for a long time. Like a meditation point, something banal that I've spent a long time looking at. I'm also trying to focus on the non-spaces, or the little spaces between things. I'm building on something that's barely there, and using it to generate the forms and images. I want the work to seem deliberate and pondered, while also being immediate and simultaneous.

JF Do you think it's important to be light? As in lightness.

PT I tend toward lightness. Heaviness is my attachment to the things that I'm looking at in the first place, a certain sentimental feeling that I have.

But in terms of color, the consistency of the paint, transparency, I want a lightness that has an ephemeral quality to it.

JF I think that the better paintings—not yours, paintings in general—are the ones that are built out of their contradictions, the opposites that they're trying to resolve. There are the contemplative and the baroque qualities that we mentioned, but also this kind of ephemerality coupled with firmness. The way you add up the different abstract forms, you get this lovely, ill-defined capriciousness, but, at the same time, the painting is strong, almost like welded sculpture.

PT I want a certain force, an adamant feeling, something emphatic, but then it's—

JF —counter-balanced.

PT Yeah. I want it to be active, in flux. It is of utmost importance that the painting has an active shift, that there is movement, that it's circling back onto itself. It's anything but fixed.

This also feeds back into the experience of time in painting. I'm interested in how a painting contains periods of duration through little shifts—we have two eyes, and there's a constant negotiation in forming a unified view even though there is a huge discrepancy between what we're seeing with our left eye and our right eye. There are a lot of inconsistencies and irregularities in how the body processes seeing. I want the painting to be a record of these inconsistencies.

JF Back to that word *active*: a painting is not simply the record of an activity; it's a creative activity for the viewer to participate in.