

## On Melville and Modern Art

An interview by  
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**JB:** How would you characterize yourself as an artist?

**CR:** I don't know if I'd want to characterize myself. I guess I'd say that I'm a modern artist dealing with old-fashioned values.

**JB:** What do you mean by "old-fashioned values"?

**CR:** Modern to me involves immediacy and speed, and old-fashioned things are slower. And even though I want my pictures to be immediate, I also want them to be entered into by the viewer. My paintings have to hold the modern viewer's attention, but I want them to be slow experiences, windows into something. That to me is old-fashioned.

**JB:** So you're attempting, in a sense, to create habitable abstractions?

**CR:** Well, the abstract issue is something separate. I would say that I'm trying to create paintings that exist as aggressive modern objects, but not in the way of paintings like Pollock's Autumn Rhythm or a Noland Target—those paintings enter your space; you don't enter theirs. Looking at my recent paintings should be a more leisurely experience, like looking at a Claude Lorraine landscape.

**JB:** In 1983, in the middle of your career, you made Reclining Figure, a classical sculpture. Is it a statement against Abstract Expressionism?

**CR:** Abstract Expressionism is like a parent. It's something I can both honor and rebel against, but nothing I do is a statement against it. When I got out of college, I was doing Color Field painting, following the Abstract Expressionist tradition. I believed wholeheartedly in it. I still believe that it was a great path for me to be on. But I reached a point in 1980 where the language of Abstract Expressionism and its derivatives didn't seem capable of letting me express myself. My foray into realist painting and classical sculpture at that time was an extreme and effective way for me to get away from the concerns of Abstract Expressionism.

**JB:** Was there one defining moment when you said, "I've got to move on"?

**CR:** My work was becoming more and more complex between 1974 and 1979, though it was all still abstract. Then I visited Spain in 1979, and it shook me up in a powerful way. The harsh light was a jolt; it forced me to look at the world very differently in strictly visual terms. And the extraordinarily complex mix of cultures that defines Spain woke me up to the dialectical stew that often defines a civilization. Suddenly nothing seemed simple or pure. It made me think more openly about my own culture and what I was doing. In Spain the cultures are intertwined, with various degrees of tension and harmony—Basque, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim. In Cordoba, a central portion of the great Mezquita mosque was torn open and rebuilt as a Catholic church. So to get to the Catholic church, you have to walk through a vast monument to Islam. In Cordoba, you actually hear people say, "I went to Mass at the mosque." It's amazing. And Goya also had a huge impact on me. I was interested in his work before, but seeing his paintings at the Prado and various other museums and churches in Madrid was very important. The Colossus knocked me flat. I had enormous empathy for the figure in The Colossus. Even though he's so powerful and frightening, there's something very sad and even scared in his demeanor. The crowds fleeing in the foreground have got him all wrong.

**JB:** It's an odd painting: this big giant, striding, dominating the sky like some kind of illustration from a children's book. It's cartoon-like, almost corny.

**CR:** It is sort of corny. Great works of art in any medium are often cartoon-like by virtue of their obviousness or ambition. Think of Moby Dick.

**JB:** A story about a man going after a big white whale.

**CR:** Exactly! How ridiculous! Talk about a cartoon. But if something like that is approached with intense belief, it can be profound. By coincidence, I read Moby-Dick around the same time as my trip to Spain.

**JB:** What led you to pick up Moby-Dick?

**CR:** Someone said I should read it, I can't remember who. I owe that person a lot. I started it and couldn't put it down. I was jolted by reading Melville's introductory chapters, the Etymology and the Extracts. He starts off his book by listing everything about his subject he can get his hands on, in every imaginable language. I thought, "Wow, that's what I have to do." I realized that I had reached a dead end based on my own narrow reading of the world and of making art. That I had to throw open my arms and embrace new things.

**JB:** You didn't flip to "Call me Ishmael"?

**CR:** I can be an extremely impatient guy, so 600-page books are not my forte. But no, I actually began on page one, with the introduction by Harold Beaver. Beaver really gets into a Melvillean fever when he describes Melville's struggle to write the book. When I dove into the first chapter and found myself following Ishmael, walking around Manhattan in a bad mood, wanting to knock people's hats off, I thought, "What the hell

does this have to do with what's supposed to be one of the great depictions of evil in all of literature?" I was expecting to read a heavy, difficult book, but it turned out to be funny and irreverent. The quality of the language is beautiful, almost conversational. I just got sucked in. To my total amazement, reading Moby-Dick was very easy.

**JB:** Everyone says that they fall apart in their reading of Moby-Dick with the Cetology. How did that chapter and others like it strike you?

**CR:** There were moments in the book when I got a little restless, but never in those chapters. The thing that I adore about Moby-Dick is that it is grounded in simple realities, like how you make rope. There is something very poetic in the mundane elements of life. Look at William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens—who ever thought you could write a great poem called "The Emperor of Ice Cream"? There is enormous beauty in Melville's description of the elements of whaling. I had more trouble with some of the more self-consciously philosophical chapters. I think one of my most restless moments was somewhere in the middle of the preacher's sermon, even though it was supposed to be very exciting.

**JB:** Queequeg felt the same. He left in the middle of it.

**CR:** Queequeg and I have a lot in common! But yes, I found the informational chapters very interesting. You know, I've always liked John McPhee. He is a marvelous writer, a terrific journalist. He takes the craft of writing about simple subjects to an awesome height, and that's part of what Melville does. At one point Melville describes the making of a simple mat in such a way as to describe our entire world and our future. It is a fantastic bit of writing.

**JB:** You said you went into the book looking for a great statement about evil.

**CR:** Yes, some big romantic thing.

**JB:** And instead you found a humorous opening and an ironic narrator. What did you ultimately find in the book that spoke to you as an artist?

**CR:** I was struck by its structure. The book is about evil, tragedy and obsession, on a Shakespearean scale, but rather than tackle it directly, writing only about big human emotions, Melville wove the story together with things that were very basic, like how you cut whale blubber. There is a huge gap between those simple things and the very far-out moments in the book. I mean, what are the chances that an eagle's wing will get caught between a hammer and a mast when a whaling ship is dropping beneath the sea? It's impossible, but by the time we are at that page, he has us by the throat. We have been rooted in the real world by his handling of the mundane. There has been no clue that we have left the real world. We just wake up and find ourselves way out there, upriver with Kurtz in Apocalypse Now.

**JB:** Is that what you want to do? Take your audience on a surprise trip?

**CR:** I want to make them feel that they know where they are, then take them to a place that they don't recognize. And I don't want to let them escape. I suppose the triumph, for me, of Moby-Dick is that we end up believing in the enormous scope of the world beyond its usually perceived borders, and the reality of evil and tragedy within that world. And through Ishmael, the potential of survival in the face of all that chaos. Melville's got you and you can't escape. Ahab and Melville were both victims of the necessity of obsession.

**JB:** What do you mean by that?

**CR:** I think obsession is at the root of what drives individuals and societies forward. Obsession has sort of an unhealthy connotation, but drive, at its extreme, is obsession. Ahab was a man obsessed. The tragedy of Moby-Dick is that Ahab's obsession brought other men to their deaths, but on the other hand, Ahab and Melville live forever through the fruits of their obsession. I remember reading The Denial of Death by Ernst Becker years ago. In it, he addresses the fact that most of us, knowingly or not, are trying to transcend our inevitable death. If you're a factory worker with a family and you've got a couple of wonderful kids, your life extends beyond death by virtue of those kids. With creative people, there's a drive to create something that will last beyond one's own lifetime. There's something about Ahab's obsession with that whale that is heroic. He is trying to do something beyond normal human capacity, bigger than life. And somehow by that act, outlive the bounds of life. In Melville's case, it was writing Moby-Dick. Obsession fueled him.

**JB:** So the necessity of obsession is, in some way, to confront the problem of death? Ahab does it his way; artists do it their way. And yet we're taught not to be obsessed. We're told to restrain ourselves and not go overboard.

**CR:** But Oscar Wilde said, "Never take moderation to extremes."

**JB:** Of course, and we put Oscar Wilde in jail. You know, I like that phrase, "the necessity of obsession." We need obsession, but we don't know we need it. Artists are able to make things that make us see our own potential for obsession. Obsession can be life affirming in the way it gets one past the problem of death, converting the problem of death into something else.

**CR:** Obsession takes you beyond the normal human limits. I think that's true on an individual scale as well as that of an entire society: Alexander's Greece, Hitler's Germany. We have learned that obsession can lead to good or evil. On the other hand, creative people have an obsessive drive to communicate what they feel about the world and articulate how they see it. Unless you're Leni Reifenstahl, you're probably out of the good and evil game.

**JB:** Do you think about your audience as you work?

**CR:** When I'm making art, the only audience I'm aware of is myself. If it works for me, I'm betting it will work for someone else. I'm sitting there looking at something, and either it's "right" or it's not. A piece is finished if it speaks to me and communicates back to me some portion of the way I feel about the world. To make art is to have a dialogue with the world, about the world.

**JB:** So you have a dialogue with an audience. Does that ever change any of your decisions as you apply paint to canvas?

**CR:** Yes, but probably not in the way you mean. I'm not looking to communicate in a language that everyone is fluent in already, or speak in a tone that I think they want. It is an artist's job to communicate in a language that is somewhat known, but different enough from what came before to encompass and properly express his or her unique view of the world. Melville turned to the Bible, Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, and so on, but Melville really only sounds like Melville. It's the same with painters, those like Titian who took painting language and pushed it into something new, step by step, and those like Picasso, or Pollock, who absorbed the elements of painting dogma and catapulted forward, radically. It might seem that Analytic Cubism or Pollock's drip paintings were a break with existing painting language, but they are actually leaps forward in a tradition. The test of an artist's importance is whether he or she creates enough of a significant variation on existing vocabularies that other artists must come to terms with it.

**JB:** Melville had trouble finding an audience. You're about the same age Melville was when he gave up writing for general audiences and turned to poetry. How does that make you feel?

**CR:** Depressed. Melville wanted to communicate something, but what he was trying to communicate was bigger than what could be served up in a palatable fashion. It could not have been done in a way that his immediate audience would have found acceptable. There are two audiences, that of your lifetime, and that of the centuries that follow—the ultimate audience. I think that Melville was hoping for lifetime success with Moby-Dick, but was aiming for the ultimate audience when he wrote it.

**JB:** When I first saw one of your paintings, the word that came to my mind was "picturesque," which is something Melville was fascinated with. He dwelled on the picturesque. He wrote poems about it. He adopted some of the basic tenets of it and transformed it into his prose. Is there something about the picturesque that is alluring to you?

**CR:** I think of the picturesque as any landscape that an individual would like to enter. But the picturesque can be frightening. The burning of Parliament was a horrific conflagration, but in Turner's paintings of the scene we are drawn in. To the extent that I'm interested in the picturesque, it's to present people with something that they will be drawn into. But I want to take them to places that they might not normally go.

**JB:** Which is what you were saying about Melville.

**CR:** Moby-Dick is enough of a romantic, rock-and-roll story to capture you. It's very picturesque. But once Melville has you, he takes you on a trip beyond imagination.

**JB:** It seems in a way that by bringing back the picturesque, as in your 1992 painting Pilgrim's Progress, you're creating or attempting to create a more accessible form of Abstract Expressionism.

**CR:** But I find Abstract Expressionism completely accessible; there's absolutely no desire on my part to try to create something that's more accessible. Abstract Expressionism had a big effect on me, but I am interested in a lot of different kinds of art, many of which fit into opposing aesthetic camps. A certain duality, a dialectic, has always been central to my perception. To the extent that I am creating something that is picturesque and seductive, it is generally going to be juxtaposed with something tough and difficult. Some pieces will lean more in one direction than the other. Sometimes the contraries will be stated more boldly than other times. Around 1985 or 1986, I was dating a woman who was a good friend of James Taylor. He dropped by my loft one time to visit with her and spend a few minutes. We walked into the studio and he turned to a piece of mine, looked for a moment, and said, "Oh, you have those rough-smooth dreams, too." I couldn't believe it! But he was dead on. As a child, I had very intense dreams that had to do with some strange conflict between rough and smooth textures. A very simple dichotomy. Very dramatic. And, I thought until then, very private and obscure. So James Taylor walks into my studio and immediately sees that we had the same dreams! That was an incredible moment. It showed me that a universal subconscious must exist. I wasn't even aware that I was painting something that was connected to my childhood dreams.

**JB:** And that dichotomy of rough and smooth is very picturesque. Some eighteenth-century aestheticians talk about the picturesque in precisely those terms.

**CR:** Where you put the blasted tree next to—

**JB:** —the shimmering pond, or something like that. That creates the same kind of image. Talking about dualities, here's the big question. Are you an Ishmael or an Ahab?

**CR:** Well, Ahab had no sense of irony and no perspective with which to see the world, except through his own actions. To the extent that I'm driven to do something that is impossible and absurd, I'm part Ahab. But as somebody who has "told the tale," I'm part Ishmael. I would say all artists are part Ahab and part Ishmael.

**JB:** If you had to stop painting for some reason, what would you do?

**CR:** I'd probably try to write. Who knows? The creative drive would surface in another direction.

**JB:** What compels you to this creativity?

**CR:** I experience the world in a very intense way. And if I don't share it with someone, I'll have the experience completely alone. And then there's the necessity of obsession.