MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

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TERRY WINTERS

A CREATOR OF LUSH ABSTRACT PAINTINGS *driven by a rigorously graphic sensibility, and graphite drawings of painterly depth, Terry Winters has been negotiating competing impulses for more than 30 years. The recognizable biological forms—plants and shellfish, at one scale; cellular and crystalline structure, at another—that appeared in his early work gave way, by the '90s, to more resolutely nonfigurative compositions whose sources are hinted in series titles: "Computation of Chains" (1995-98), "Set Diagram" (2000-02), "Turbulence Skins" (2002-04). Without completely abandoning his interest in depicting the real world, Winters turned away from tangible objects toward the kinds of spaces being investigated by mathematicians and physicists, and toward the spatial metaphors, technical processes and informational resources of digital technology. All continue to inform his work. At the same time, he has remained deeply committed to hands-on, first-person execution.*

Winters's interest in exploring space in unconventional ways has extended to installations, notably when he collaborated with Rem Koolhaas for a 2001 exhibition at Lehmann Maupin gallery, then in SoHo, which the architect partially lined with plywood; three of the 60 paintings on view were hung on the ceiling. Also in 2001, the Metropolitan Museum of Art presented a survey of Winters's prints, showcasing a medium that has long held special interest for him. An exhibition of work in all mediums spanning the decade 1994-2004 originated at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass. in 2004 and traveled to museums in San Diego and Houston [see A.i.A., *Apr. '05]. Winters's first major museum show was organized in 1991 by the Whitney Museum of American Art.*

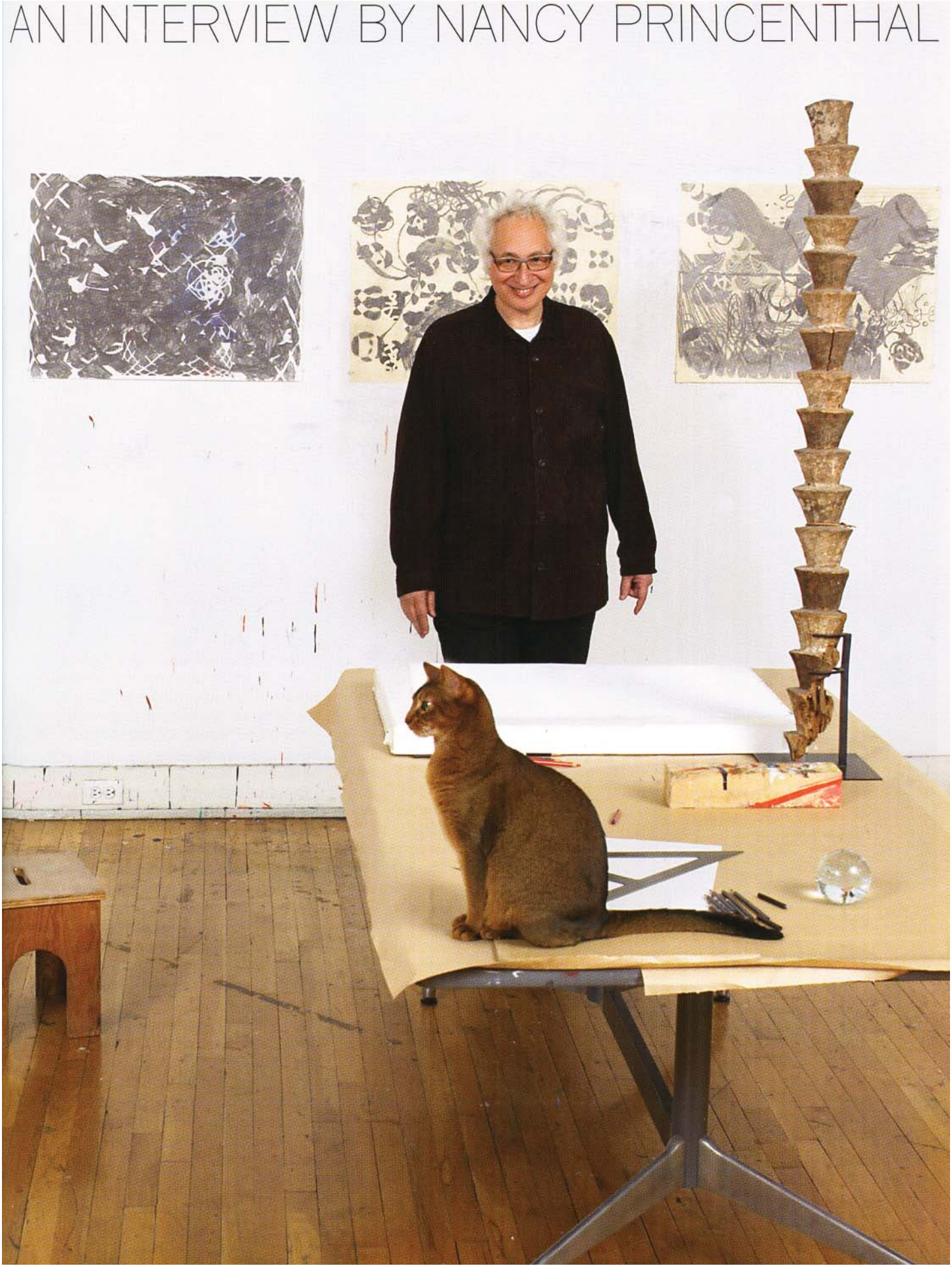
The exhibition of recent work that opened at Matthew Marks in November was Winters's seventh at the gallery. Called "Knotted Graphs," it featured selections from several bodies of work in addition to seven big canvases from the titular series (all works were completed in 2008). Though some elements discernibly differ from one series to the next—an underlying grid is slightly more apparent in the "Knotted Graph" paintings than in the "Illustrated Set" works—kinships prevail. Luminous color, in particular a marine blue that suggests stained glass, distinguishes the entire group of paintings. A bulbous, burgeoning module that in one permutation or another has recurred throughout Winters's career appears repeatedly. It generally takes the form of a soft shape bound by string that leaves its mark in negative, as if it had been applied to the surface of the painting and then pulled off.

The paintings are composed in layers, so several iterations of these modules often shadow each other; the effect suggests a deliberately misregistered print. Often, the surfaces begin with two or more mutually interfering patterns: wavy parallel lines and grids, or helixes. The transparency of the oil paints that Winters uses, and the simplicity of his palette, contribute to a remarkable degree of lucidity, given the predominant impression of barely constrained chaos. We are made aware, as Winters wants, of every decision that has gone into each work. At the same time, he has us chase the elusive moment at which line becomes form, pursuing what could be called a string theory of visual description. The complicated spaces that the drawings seemingly create both behind and, more surprisingly, in front of the paper's surface expose Winters's thinking most clearly. Which is to say, we feel we would like to know more.

Born in Brooklyn in 1949, Winters received a BFA from Pratt Institute in 1971. He now splits his time between Tribeca and rural Columbia County in upstate New York. The following interview took place in November at his Manhattan studio. —NP

Terry Winters in his New York studio, 2008. Photo Martien Mulder.

AN INTERVIEW BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL



NANCY PRINCENTHAL Let's start with the new studio in Columbia County. How has being in the country affected the work?

TERRY WINTERS I've been working in these classical New York loft spaces for a while, the 25-by-90-foot buildings. I wanted to get a space that was wider so I could work across the paintings in a different way, and have a different sense of how they're developed. Not in terms of working larger, but of being able to have more work around, living with it more.

NP Does the light in your upstate studio and the landscape in general play a part in the recent work?

TW I think what I'm most affected by is the relentless change in the weather—clouds, light, wind. And also the ceaseless activity of insects and animals. There's a lot of activity, a literal kind of buzz, a pulse that happens. It happens in the city, too, and it's not that I think the city is any less alive and pulsing. But there's a lot less noise up there.

NP Maybe spending more time in a rural area has some relevance to one question I wanted to ask, which is: over the course of the three decades or so you've been painting, there seems to have been a development from organic space to conceptual space, or organic science to inorganic science as sources of metaphor. Does that sound right to you?

TW That's one way you could track it, but it hasn't really been the approach I've taken. My interest has been in architecture, how form reflects ideas about life. Those notions could be organic or not.

NP In your early paintings, there were often elements that were recognizable biological forms—cells, plant life.

TW I was surprised that the paintings developed such clear imagery, that they had images, like plants and flowers.

NP There's been a lot of water under the bridge since that work. Is there still the same thread, the same tension, between describing things in the world and . . .

TW Yes, that's the tension, that's where the traction is. Between image and organizing principle.

NP As I understand it, one guiding concept for the new paintings is knot theory.

TW Knots are devices I use to develop folds in the surface—they become a series of abstract events. The paintings involve a family of knotted forms that have interested me, along with a wider range of topological structures or phase diagrams. [In simple examples, these diagrams chart the pressure and temperature conditions under which a basic substance like water changes states from gas to liquid to solid.—*ed.*] Just like in earlier work, I'm taking preexisting imagery and respecifying it through the painting process. I'm reluctant to reduce the subject to what the source materials or references are, because that's something I want to be as wide open as possible.

NP But these works have to do, in part, with the kinds of spaces that are described by science, or that are revealed by digital technology?

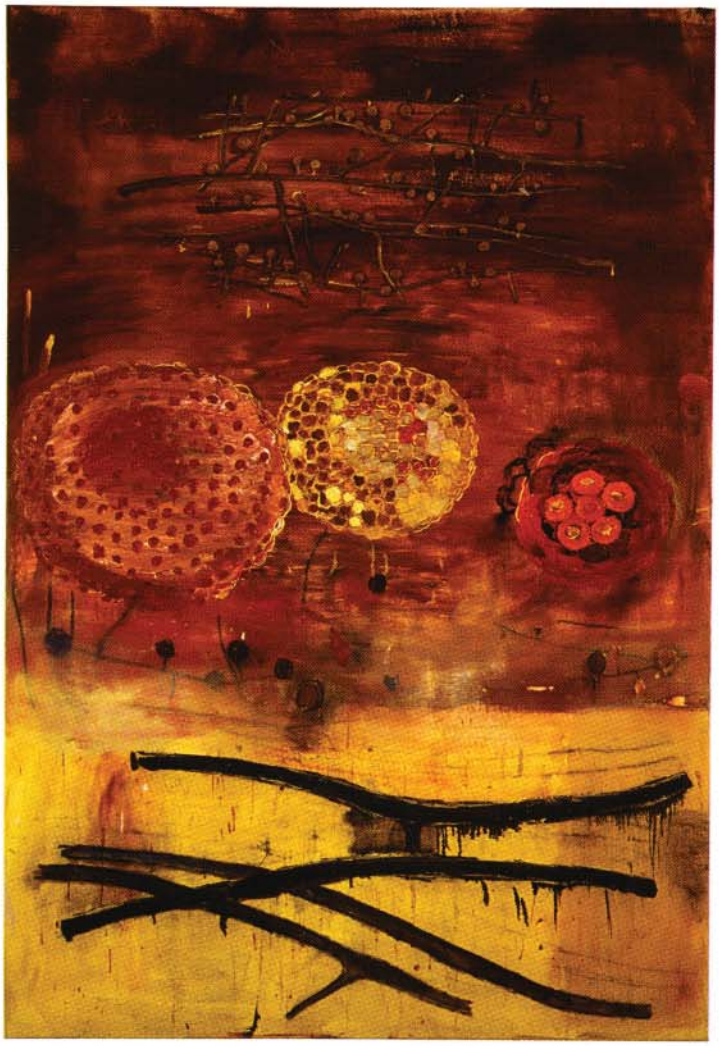
TW There's been a development in all the sciences of new spatial landscapes that are open to an investigation through painting. I was looking for a way to address an expanded idea of nature. That expanded idea includes the wide variety of spaces available through computer visualization.

NP In the catalogue essay for the show at Matthew Marks [by art historian Kathryn Tuma] there's a discussion of knot theory as having been developed in part as a way to describe the structure of an atom. Is there that kind of energy, that kind of engine-of-the-world thing inside of each of the units in those paintings?

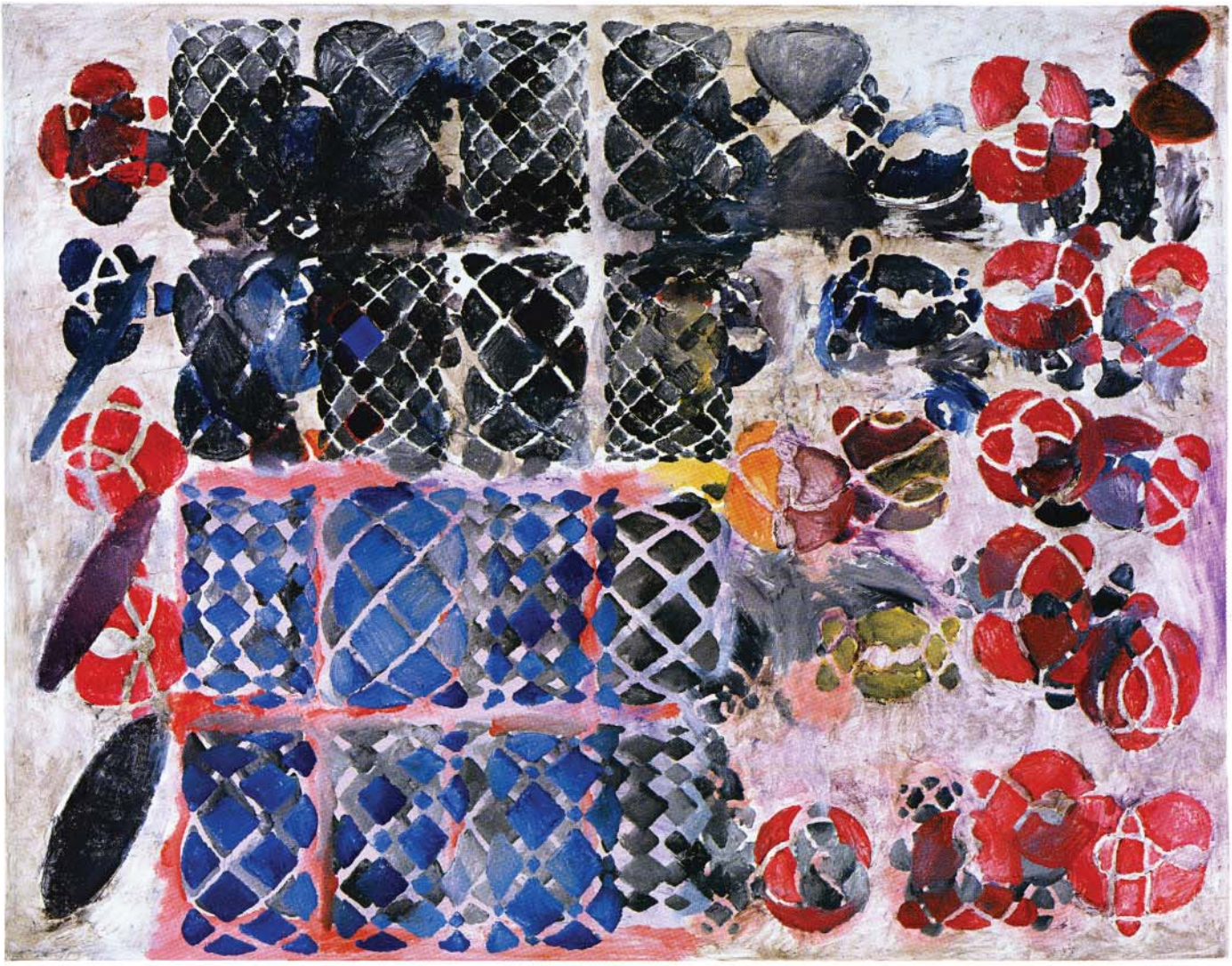
TW I hope so! I'm trying to build those qualities into my own work. But it's not as if I'm trying to paint a molecular painting, or illustrate that molecular phenomenon.

NP But are we invited to see the paintings that way?

TW Definitely—I would welcome it. But the scale isn't specific. I'd welcome a cosmological reading, or even a social reading. I'm interested in how the paintings open up to those different kinds of things. I'm trying to engineer them to the point where it's difficult to locate one meaning and they open up to other possibilities.



Point, 1985, oil on linen, 102⅛ by 69 inches. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



Knotted Graphs/1, 2008, oil on linen, 77 by 98 inches.

NP Who do you feel yourself to be in dialogue with, in terms of abstraction? The context you began painting in, 30 years ago, was very different from the one that exists now.

TW I grew up in New York and had a very classical art education—I took figure-drawing classes. But by the time I went to Pratt, the work that really interested me was being done by the so-called Post-Minimalists, and it focused on methods and materials. Most of that work wasn't painting. But of that group, Marden and Ryman both found ways to extend painting while still addressing some of those same concerns. How the paintings were made was very important. That's what I identified as being the most adventurous, experimental.

NP *You're talking about work that was* driven by process.

TW Yes, that pushed an idea about what abstraction was, in term of its literalness, in terms of how material and form were generated and even in terms of metaphor. In some way I wanted to connect process and picture-making. I wanted to figure out a way to reconcile those interests. And to figure out a way to paint pictures that didn't seem like a fallback to representational imagery.

NP Speaking of materials, what exactly are Lake pigments? What role do they play in the new work?

TW They're transparent dyes that have been precipitated on an inert base, like white clay. Basically it's pigment that carries the coloring of a dye. They're transparent paints and they're very ancient. The Egyptians used them but they are still being synthesized.

NP You're working with a fairly limited palette, and the mixing goes on on the surface of the painting?

TW Yes, there are a number of Lake pigments but the three primaries give especially rich transparencies. I ended up using those as the key to developing these recent paintings. A lot of the mixing takes place right on the painting, either painting wet into wet or through glazing, the development of layers. Color plays a big role in these paintings. It's one of the variables that help determine the subject and meaning of the work. But the choices are intuitive and generally tied into my overall concerns at the moment. Right now I'm working on a group of paintings that use a big variety of color, the full spectrum.

NP What do you know when you're starting a painting? What do you have already established as a framework for the painting, and what happens on the surface?

TW Well, I start with a set of reference materials, in this case topological and acoustic imagery. I've determined the size of the paintings, plus the range of pigments. I'm setting up parameters

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within which to improvise. So I have a general notion of what form the painting will take but I'm pushing—or, really, following—the painting along to the point where it builds mass or takes on a meaning that gives it specificity.

NP Drawing and printmaking are still key to your practice. Do the drawings ever precede the paintings? Are there prints that are somehow generative for the paintings?

TW All three of those avenues are ways into the territory for me. Each is a different instrument that I utilize. They're tools to experiment or explore and play, and each one influences or helps illuminate the other; there's no hierarchy.

NP So the paintings can lead to the drawings, as well as the other way around?

TW Yes, absolutely.

NP Are you involved in any printmaking projects now?

TW Yes, I'm working on a group of etchings. And I've just finished a number of print projects that I had been working on for the past couple of years.

NP When you work in the studio you work alone?

TW Pretty much.

NP So is there a huge difference in how the work feels when you're working in a printshop?

TW Not in terms of the difficulty for me to actually get something that feels acceptable! It's just another level of energy that's nice to have. To have input from other people who are also invested—printers tend to be very interested in how things are made. It's nice to bounce ideas off other people. I appreciate their observations.

NP Are you doing other collaborations like the Ben Marcus project [a suite of 42 offset lithographs titled "Turbulence Skins," 2004, its text-and-image composites the result of a series of exchanges between the artist and Marcus, a writer of experimental fiction], or the one with Trisha Brown [Winters designed sets and costumes for the dance *El Trilogy*, 1999/2000]?

TW No. Although this year I published a portfolio of relief prints called "In Blue" with Grenfell Press, and Eliot Weinberger contributed a text. Leslie Miller suggested Eliot, whose work I've admired. [Weinberger is an essayist and translator associated with Latin American literature.] We gave him a set of proofs and sometime later he delivered his text. It was a good fit. I'm not really thinking in terms of collaboration at the moment. There's something going on with the new drawings and paintings, and I feel I need to spend a lot of time with them. The paintings in this show seem the beginning of another way that I could explore building these images.

NP How so?

TW Just in terms of being more declarative.

NP Wasn't the computer used for developing some of the imagery in the work of the 1990s?

TW Yes, especially in the printmaking. And some of the source material comes from digital imagery.

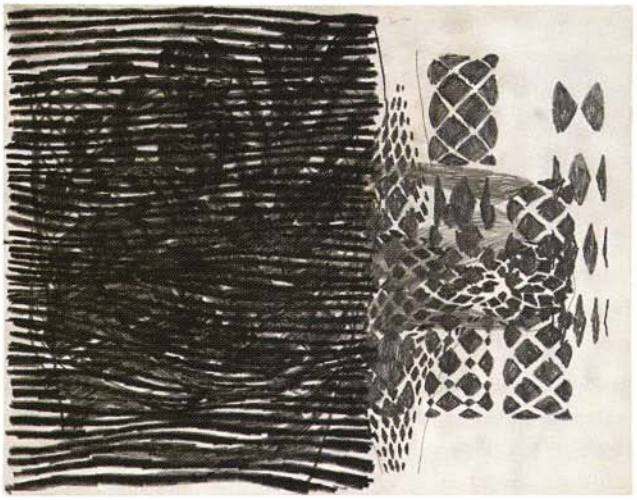
NP Are you still involved with computers in that way?

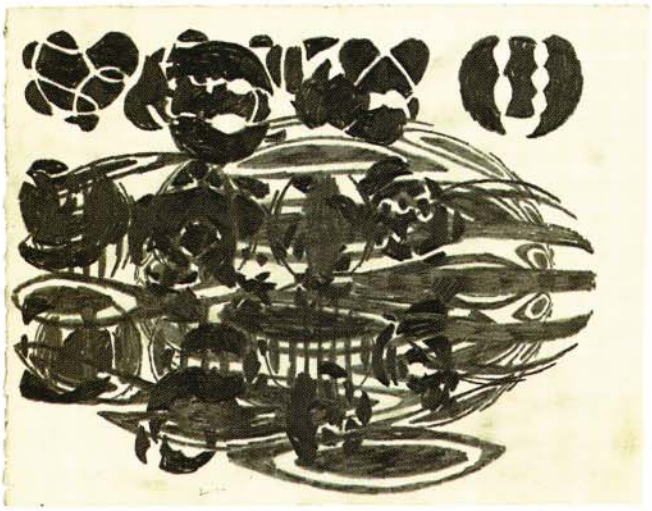
TW Yes, to some extent. It's a huge source for reference material. And printmaking lends itself to using many of these digital technologies. The whole field has changed in terms of using computers to generate images. Painting shares those concerns, so it seems like a logical extension to address the mechanics of those media. I'm interested in how painting can make virtual places actual.

NP You're working with a brush, and . . .

TW And with the logics of gesture and touch. And physical material. It's very easy to see the paintings as raw material and bodily gesture, just in terms of how they're made.

NP In the sense that a Brice Marden





Above, *Viewing Notation/2*, 2007-08, graphite on paper, 11 by 14 inches.

Left, *Viewing Notation/4*, 2007-08, graphite on paper, 11 by 14 inches.

Opposite, *Illustrated Set/1*, 2008, oil on linen, 55 by 42½ inches.

painting, for instance, is related to arm span and gesture?
TW Every painting is measured that way.
NP Do you start with drawing on the canvas?
TW My approach is through drawing. Painting has more dimensions, it's layered and the ground is constantly shifting. But my approach is very basic; it's like drawing and writing.
NP Is there a relationship between the mark of writing and the mark of depiction in the drawing?
TW I think so. There's something about the pragmatics of just getting something down. A nonesthetic directness of transcription. The abstraction of the pictures is a development of signs that are a kind of writing.
NP How long does each painting take, roughly, from beginning to end?
TW They each have their own life span, so there's no determining factor. They tend to be around a while in the studio before they're ready to leave. And I need to have them around to figure out whether I'm done with them—or whether they're done with me.
NP One thing that's been characteristic of your work from the beginning is that you've attracted some of the most interesting writers in the business, who have engaged in dialogues with you about an incredibly wide range of materials: Richard Shiff's analogy with basic physical elements in unstable states, John Rajchman's "brain city" and his concept of ungrounding. So how much does a viewer need to know?
TW Nothing! But at the same time, the more you bring to the experience the more you can get back. I'm grateful to have the benefit of any thoughtful take on my work.
NP Well, what would you like viewers to bring to the work, given that some of those ideas—topology, for instance . . .
TW I don't think any of that is necessary. The paintings come out of painting, my own connection to painting's story or history and a desire on my part to paint. On one level, I think the paintings are self-evident. It's part of why I've embraced this notion of abstraction. Abstraction is a category of work and thought that is easily accessible to everybody now. Everybody understands abstract painting. Now that 20th-century painting is finally over, everybody gets it.
NP That's an optimistic thought! Do you believe that abstraction has a big, friendly audience?
TW I think it's run a certain course and become part of the lexicon of what it means to be contemporary. I'm interested in how that language can be extended, and distended or torqued to address something beyond the rhetoric. To make something new, to project it into a new place.
NP Are you encouraged by what seems to be a renaissance of painting in the new generation?
TW Yes, absolutely. I think it's an exciting time for painting. Things have opened up in a number of ways, there's a very freestyle mixture of abstraction and representation going on now and it's helping to build a new pictorial narrative. ○

"Terry Winters: Knotted Graphs" was at Matthew Marks, New York, Nov. 6, 2008-Jan. 24, 2009.