DAVID KLAMEN AND LISA WAINWRIGHT

IN CONVERSATION

LISA WAINWRIGHT

It's so exciting to be talking about this recent body of sculpture, since we have already spent many hours talking about your painting. This is quite the shift. Historically there have been painters who sculpt—Picasso, Matisse, or today, Nicole Eisenman, Huma Bhabha. In their cases they consistently go back and forth between painting and sculpture. You are known for these gorgeous and semiotically complex paintings created throughout the last forty years. What compelled you to turn to 3D assemblages now? It's a pretty radical move.

DAVID KLAMEN

Many years ago I became comfortable with the notion that my work would be in pursuit of the ideas and creative directions most meaningful to me. I don't spend time trying to calculate a visually cohesive direction. I follow my inspiration, making the next work that I want to see.

In contrast to pursuing a specific visual structure, my work is informed by exploring the question "How do we know what we know?" and testing various answers. With this new body of work, I found myself sketching ideas that would only make sense as three-dimensional forms; they were meant to visualize sculptures. Ceramics was the most direct path to pursue this idea. [Fig. 1]

Once I began making ceramic sculpture, I found myself working in a medium in which I have no formal training or conventional skill. This, to me, is unlike my paintings, which are quite disciplined. I'm covered in clay and working far outside of my technical comfort zone when making these new works.

Out of necessity I also learned new processes, including slip casting. This meant acquiring a large collection of mostly unused plaster molds in addition to making some of my own.

Fig. 1 David Klamen, *Preliminary Sketch*, 2022. Courtesy of David Klamen Studio.

LW It's so interesting—some of these molds had never been used. It makes me think that you're almost embracing a kind of Dada method of chance here. In that improvisation you're letting go of control of it, and that's not your thing, David. How does it feel?

DK **Yeah, that's not part of my studio tradition, but I'm embracing it with these works. These are very consciously not sculpted to create part-to-whole formal relationships. I go out of my way during much of the process to make sure that I don't focus on what the forms are. We don't even look inside of the molds until we open them up and discover whatever was recorded by the clay. They are a surprise to me from beginning to end.**

LW On the one hand, you've got recognizable objects that come from a chance operation; on the other, your touch is still very evident. I would even throw Rodin into this conversation, believe it or not. It's that real physicality, that real haptic sense. And there's something about ceramics right

now. I always say that a love of primeval goo is the reason ceramics are big in the art world again. Maybe it's a response to high technology?

DK I think that's exactly right. I'm starting off with hundreds of pounds of wet clay and ending up with a complex, multifaceted sculpture. Its creation is very much a physical record of my interaction with the material. Much like oil paint, clay is a material very capable of recording the physical record of its history. It contains every fingerprint, every external impact—it demonstrates gravity, viscosity, and the forces that manipulate it. Clay has a rich, ancient history with thousands of years of various traditions; it's an elemental material that we all understand on some level.

LW The history allows us to contextualize your work, yet there is also an elemental relationship: we all know what it feels like to try forming shapes out of clay.

When making these works, you are translating found molds and assembling these handmade props in the tradition of Assemblage, of Robert Rauschenberg or Rachel Harrison. I see these relating to some of your paintings that are formed by accumulation. [Fig. 2]

DK In many ways, the ceramics have a lot in common with my paintings—the multi-canvas pieces and multiple-window watercolors. They are sculptures made of sculptures, as many of my paintings feel as if they're paintings of paintings or meta-paintings. Both disclose themselves very slowly. You can't really see one of these sculptures quickly; they ask you to walk around them and discover imagery over time in a way that's similar to my paintings.

LW Yes, slow looking is richly rewarded in both. The last time I saw a vessel in your work was a beautiful Chinese pot painted in a beautiful interior. So David Klamen's taste has shifted. Any comments on taste? [Fig. 3]

DK When I think of the history of my work, I often imagine it as if it were sound; I have a degree of synesthesia, which has certainly influenced me in some ways. I've made most of my work as quiet as I can. But at times I have shifted and turned it on full volume. These sculptures are created with a kind of flurry of activity and physicality that, along with their heterogeneous elements, achieves something like a nontraditional orchestration.

LW Yeah, that's so cool, the synesthesia. Is it a boisterous sound? Is it a hip-hop kitsch? Has your taste gone from classical to hip-hop?

DK While I do literally see flashes of light and color when I hear loud sounds, I have always used sound as a metaphor to describe—and to understand—my work and that of others. They've always been connected.

Fig. 3 David Klamen, *Untitled (Vase)*, 1993.

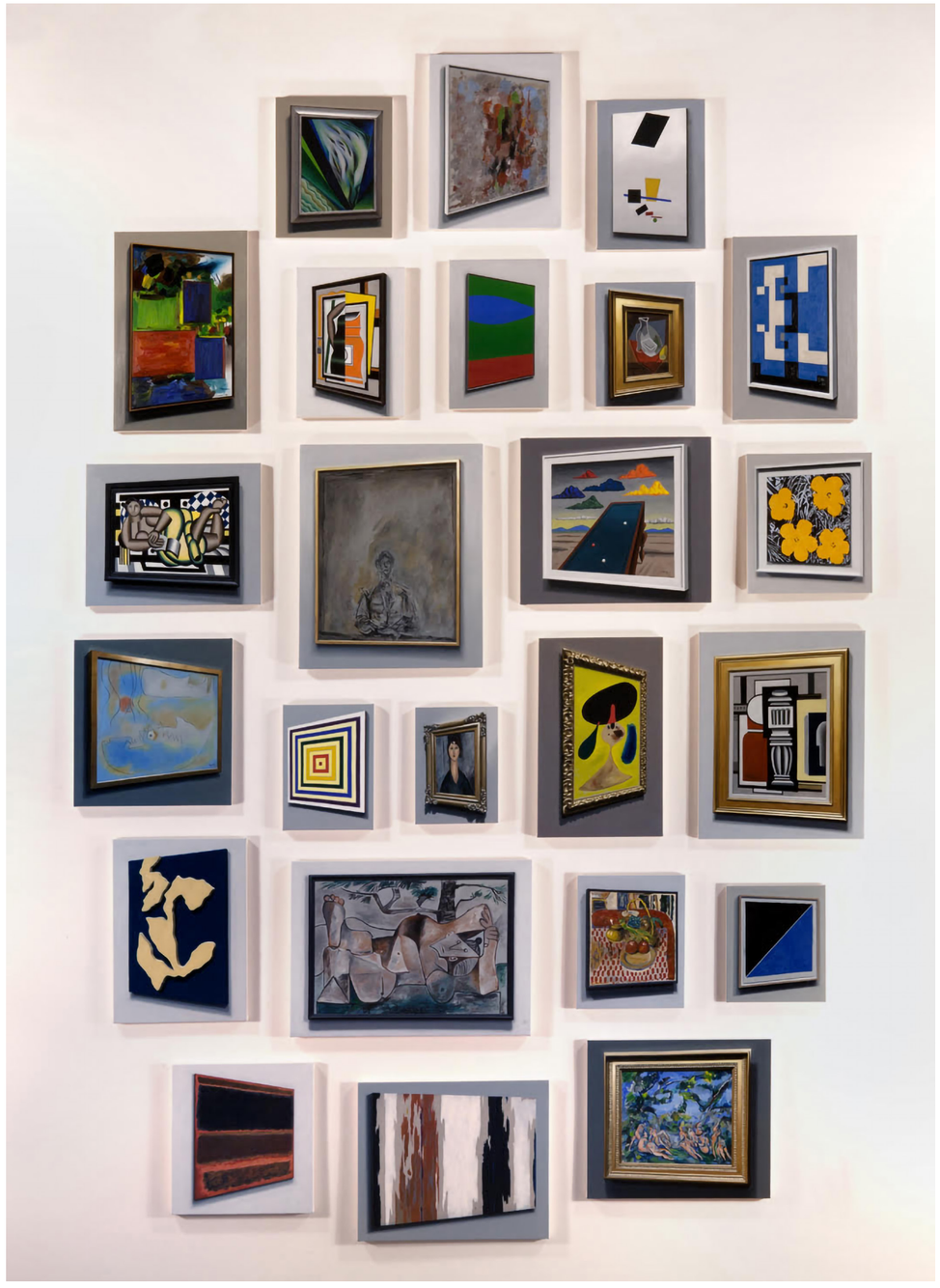

Fig. 2 David Klamen, *Meta-Painting Constellation*, 2011.

Fig. 4 David Klamen, *Detroit*, 2022. Courtesy of David Klamen Studio.

LW What music were you listening to when you made this work?

DK I have diverse taste in music; I love world music and metal.

LW Ah! Okay, I see the metal.

Another thing at play here is the Surrealist juxtaposition of entities. For instance, when you get close to this one sculpture, what you actually see is a corn cob coming out of the head of a little kitty cat (see p. 81).

DK I stack elements and then I stack more elements, and when I get to the top, I start to consider whether it captures what I'm thinking. I'll add something and, if I don't like it, I just cut it off and add something else, or cut it in half and add something else on top.

LW You're having too much fun!

DK It is incredibly fun, and it's absurd—the clay could be a toyetic form, a wheel-thrown vessel, or who knows what. If it doesn't resonate as a resolution, I just slice it in half and add more until it reaches the final piece that makes sense for me.

LW The glazing is important, and some of them have very rich glazes, metallic and shiny like a varnish.

DK Glazing is so different from painting. It was not at all what I anticipated, but I've learned so much and explored along the way. From the conception of these works in the sketches, it was important they be unified, resolved sculptures. I don't want them to look like found objects put together. Glazing them is a way that I can create a unified exoskeleton that structurally gives the piece a resilience and also, in most cases, slows down the disclosure of the images so that you experience the gestalt of the entire piece.

As you spend more time with and walk around each of them, you discover all the elements that reveal themselves slowly because of the glazes' reflectiveness. The cracks don't follow the forms of the sculpture. The glaze creates a misdirection and unification. It invites the viewer to participate in understanding the images and the objects by refocusing their attention.

Some forms end up very smooth and operate as a kind of bent mirror. The very reflective glaze gives some of them a dynamic variation. In other cases, I make a point of obfuscating the structures by glazing in a very coarse way that equally slows down the discovery of images. There is always a level of discovery whenever I fire something.

LW Did you have to teach yourself glazing?

DK I have people who give me technical guidance, who are brilliant and have decades of experience. While they can't answer the questions regarding what I want to make, they certainly help me understand what is considered reasonable and good practice. At times I'm working well outside of most glazing conventions.

LW Oh, so you're not following the rules.

DK No, I'm not following the rules at all. There is a lot of improvisation. For example, some recent pieces didn't fit in the kiln, so we removed the lid and added rows of bricks on the top to get more room.

There are myriad traditions in ceramics based on millennia of observation and experience, but I am purposefully not following them. I don't want to participate in the craft tradition. Clay is so elemental, and I don't want to try to transcend its nature in a display of technical skill; I want to embrace its semiotic tendencies.

LW There's a phenomenological experience one has with sculpture that's different from that of painting. One must move around the object; it unfolds in time and space.

DK The general conceptual framework in which I'm working is completely in line with my paintings. The ideas feel cohesive and consistent for me across my work. That said, the act of making is completely different. [Fig. 4]

My painting is very meditative and reflective and requires a kind of mental discipline. These sculptures are very different; I'm working with assistants, and there's an element of a physical event. The process starts off with hundreds of pounds of clay in thousands of pounds of molds.

LW I think this is very contemporary, David, akin to the way that I teach from Modernism to Postmodernism to Decadence. These works are made from deconstructed bits and they're excessive, kind of *memento mori*, which is part of decadence. Does this make any sense to you?

DK There is something excessive about it, and it's not just the visual spectacle. There's something excessive about taking clay and molding these things all at once and stacking them all together. They are literally crashed together. At times, I have literally wound up and pitched some of the elements at the . . .

LW Wait, say that again?

DK Pitch them, throw them like a ball. When the elements impact together, the weight creates imprints and forms that wouldn't happen otherwise. It highlights the momentum, centrifugal force, and gravity creating them.

LW You keep a meditative state in the paintings. Now, you've let it rip. There is an energy and intensity about these.

DK There's something very energetic in the act of creating them. They are made with a lot of physical drive—a journey of discovery and amusement. The initial form usually takes around twelve hours of uninterrupted work preparing the clay and slip, filling and emptying molds.

LW Maybe it's like what Jackson Pollock talked about, sort of an existential screaming "I am here" over and over and over again, like gestural painting.

DK I hadn't thought of it that way, but it sounds right. Like Pollock's paintings, these works reveal an indexical record of their creation. They are mostly formed while the clay is wet and malleable, so it can capture my touch and collapse and crack under the weight of the other elements.

LW We were talking about their *memento mori*, their *vanitas*. Just like in still life painting, these ceramic works are richly beautiful, but it's meant to get us to something metaphysical, something that transcends the physical.

DK I can see the notion of transcendence being read into some of the pieces. Some clearly have a ceremonial feel. They present a self-conscious, meditative invitation to reflect on ourselves, our past, and our world.

LW That's the beauty of art, right? It can be many things. On the one hand, I could use your term "life trophies." They are the accumulation of memory; they are object poems of a past and the accretion of memories.

DK Right, life trophies. They are compilations of the experiences of life, comprised in part by constant accumulation and exposure to *stuff*. A collection of memories, collapsed attempts, past ambitions, and tchotchkes, topped off with a present moment of optimism and hope. A complicated visual world that discloses itself slowly, asking us to reflect on our experiences and to celebrate the perplexity of knowing ourselves.

ABOUT LISA WAINWRIGHT

Lisa Wainwright is a professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She served as dean of faculty for over ten years and held other major leadership roles, including dean of the graduate program, for an additional five years. Dr. Wainwright has written numerous articles for books and international academic journals while also authoring an extensive list of exhibition catalogues. She has lectured on topics from Rauschenberg and the history of the found object to contemporary art to education and creativity, and she has curated multiple exhibitions based on her research interests. Dr. Wainwright received her BA, *cum laude*, from Vanderbilt University and earned both an MA and PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.