

Alpha 3 / Omega 3 93½" x 52" / 33½" x 52" x 25" 2003

**In and Around the Studio:
Reni Gower in conversation
with Kevin Concannon**

KC: As you describe it, "A Strange Loop is a Tangled Hierarchy of levels where each level has some relation to the other. A strange loop arises when, by moving up or down through a hierarchical system, one finds oneself back where one started." Douglas R. Hofstadter, whose book, Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid, you refer to, is quoted as saying a strange loop is "not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive 'upward' shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one's sense of departing

*ever further from one's origin, one winds up, to one's shock, exactly where one had started out."*¹

This reference suggests several things. On the most obvious level, it suggests that you see your work as having wound its way back to concerns present and essential to your earliest work. Can you identify those concerns and explain how they emerge again? On the face of it, your work seems to have come quite a distance.

RG: My current work echoes many of the concerns I had as a young artist. Seduced by the act of painting, I still try to create a private space within a public one that actively engages the viewer. I have always felt art, or in my case painting should be intimately integrated into life. By transcending the decorative, it should also be experiential.



Alpha 2 / Omega 2 93½" x 52" / 33½" x 52" x 25" 2000-2002

KC: So you're saying that it's important to not have it simply be a decorative thing, but one could argue that the very motifs of your work are often exceptionally decorative, and then you kind of deconstruct that somehow. Can you explain why?


RG: Though it may seem ironic to use decoration to critique the decorative, my intent is rooted in the universality of ornamental motifs. For example, the circle has similar connotations across cultures and can be found embedded in many diverse ethnic patterns. Recognition of motifs such as the circle creates an instinctual connection between the viewer and the art work. I first experienced this intuitive understanding when I visited southern Spain and discovered the Moorish mosques and gardens of the Alhambra. Even though I had

no personal ties to Islam, the complex decorative tile work resonated within me. It was instantly exciting and made complete visual sense. So I thought, "Why couldn't something similar happen through painting?"

KC: You've just characterized the work as "refining itself." Are you suggesting that the work has a sort of autonomy or life of its own?

RG: For me, the making of a painting is not fully preconceived. Rather it evolves slowly through an extended internal conversation and an ongoing process that is both additive and subtractive. By responding to materials, reacting to past works, and assimilating new influences, I travel a non linear path in my studio. Like swimming, much of my practice is based on repetitive activity that allows my mind to wander in a heightened





contemplative state. Ideally, this is where the "aha" moments occur that move the research forward. At its best, the creative process disengages me from collective clutter. Beyond the obvious personal benefits, I try to transfer that experience to my viewer.

KC: What do you think it does for them?

RG: I hope the experience is calming; that it provides a place to focus; that it fosters introspection; and that it facilitates looking in a new way.

KC: On another level, you have come from student to teacher, and I'm wondering how that plays into the idea of the full circle or the loop. You've just mentioned it's about a conversation with yourself, but obviously you're having conversations with lots of people

sort of across the moment and back through time in a couple different senses of that word. Do you learn from your students?

RG: Absolutely, the shared exchange between student and teacher is very rewarding. For me, teaching is primarily listening and asking questions that will guide the young artist to find his or her unique voice. The questions I ask them, I also ask myself. It's always gratifying to think outside one's personal perspective and I thrive on the insights students bring forth in critiques. It is really a gift to see through someone else's eyes.

KC: So let me extend that to your friends throughout your career. You've had a group of women with whom you've exhibited, a pretty stable, solid group of fellow travelers over the years that I've known you. When you are dealing



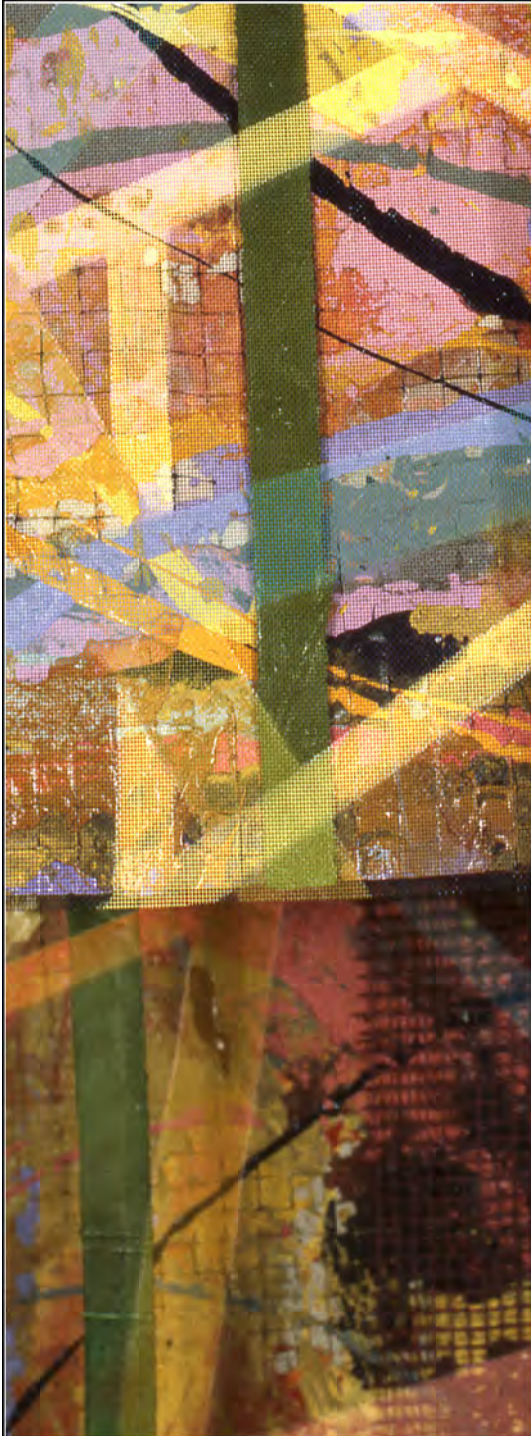
Two x Three: Up 54" x 54" 1995
Two x Three: Dwn 18" x 54" x 18" 1995

with students, what you just described suggests to me that there is always something kind of surprising in that feedback loop. You're always forced to respond to things that you didn't anticipate. When you build a body of friends, we tend as human beings, it seems to me, to choose our friends to be more like us than different than us. Is there a difference in the kinds of support that you gain from your students than you gain from your friends?

RG: I have created remarkable opportunities and I have made many amazing friends through my curatorial projects over the years. Sometimes, the exhibitions I design begin with shared ideas and artists I know very well. Other times, the artists are initially strangers. Either way, the artists' response to my efforts encourages me to keep putting new projects

together. My first curatorial undertaking began with five women. We were all at a similar stage in our careers and we wanted to break through the proverbial glass ceiling. By tapping individual networks, we secured museum showings and published an exhibition catalog. The shared effort to find venues, organize logistics and design a catalog was a rewarding experience for me. It confirmed that I was a good administrator and collaborator. Since then I have gone on to organize many more traveling shows. I've gotten something different from each experience. I've had wonderful opportunities to grow and travel with these projects, in ways that are totally different from pursuing and promoting a solo career.

KC: *I know you've done a number of workshops at professional*



Zig 96" x 30" x 29" 1993

Zag 48" x 30" x 29" 1993

conferences such as College Art Association (CAA) and Southeastern College Art Conference (SECAC). That's something else that's very striking about the trajectory of your career. There's this consistent sort of giving back and working collectively—maybe collectively isn't really the appropriate word—the works are all discrete, independent works, but there's this power that you seem to harness through collective action.

RG: I think it's important to be generous. Sharing information and working collaboratively is empowering. In this light, I have taught an undergraduate professional practices course for over 20 years and many of the conference panels I organize focus on mentoring and DIY strategies for creating a sustainable life in the arts. I was fortunate to have been mentored as a young student, and

it made a huge difference in what I thought I could achieve. It encouraged me to pursue art as a career. If I hadn't had those particular teachers, I wonder if I would be here now? I feel I owe it to my mentors to pay it forward to the next generation.

KC: *So, to get back to the question we started with, do you see yourself in this strange loop as a student yet again? Do you see yourself in any way as a student now?*

RG: Oh, yes, lots of times when I'm starting a new project or learning a new technology. I often hear myself saying, "What made me think I could do this?" And then my ego counters with "What makes you think you can't?" I firmly believe you learn what you need to learn when you need to learn it.



Transit 18 91" x 26" 2007

KC: Let's talk a little bit more about the work itself. Early on you seemed interested in Rauschenberg. You have noted, for example, that you wrote a Masters—you did two Masters' theses: an MA and an MFA—one on Rauschenberg and the other one about Alternative Spaces.

*RG: While I have been influenced by many artists, Rauschenberg's and Rothko's explorations provide interesting comparisons and precedents for my work. Rauschenberg's ability to make something out of recycled, non-art, non-traditional materials appealed to my sensibility of bringing disparate things together in a harmonious way. For example, his *Hoarfrosts* and *Combines* are raw and beautiful. I was also interested in his interactive works such as the all-white paintings that were activated only by the viewer's shadow; his way of making art life*

and life art; and his collaborative cross cultural works through R.O.C.I. (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange.) I also think the core of my work is about color and experiencing color in a physical way. Rothko's paintings are a perfect example of work that has this impact. When you stand in front of a Rothko, you feel the color pulsing or pushing against your body.

KC: In another conversation, you mentioned the Tate Modern specifically. I think that's really the ultimate installation of Rothko. In other experiences of Rothko pictures, they seem—frankly, they seem dead; it seems criminal. And it has a lot to do with the light in the room. Have you had similar sorts of demands as an artist in terms of the environment in which your work is shown? Is that important to you?



Transit 3 91" x 30" 1988 / 2002

RG: Lighting is very important. Due to their density, my paintings absorb a lot of light. If they are under-lit they appear flat and much of the internal information is hidden in shadows. Lighting can make or break the experience. Despite being lowly lit, Rothko's numerous paintings in the Tate installation operate as one or as different sides of one personality vying for attention. It is very animated, but one needs to spend time to experience it. Unfortunately, many miss it. With this disregard in mind, I use a layered complexity to counter the quick three-second look.

KC: *You've also written about early interest in collage, pattern, quilts, grids, layering, and the physical application of paint. That's quite a bit to unpack. Let's start with Pattern and Decoration (P&D), which is certainly something I think*

most people would see in the work, and that would certainly come to mind, if they had any historic consciousness about contemporary art. You note of your own undergraduate work that, "At this point, I started thinking about painting as decorative object vs. painting as an environmental installation." And we've talked a little bit just now about this installation concept and environment, the painting as an environment. Can you talk about any relationship to pattern and decoration?

RG: I love pattern and decorative work, especially works that incorporate multiple systems slammed together to make new systems and rhythms, such as the work of the P&D painters. Curiously, many P&D works do not sustain me. Instead, I would claim Matisse as an important historical



Zebo: WTR 91" x 104" x 73" 1991

precedent and American piece quilts, Persian miniatures, Islamic key patterns, and ethnic textiles as enduring inspirations.

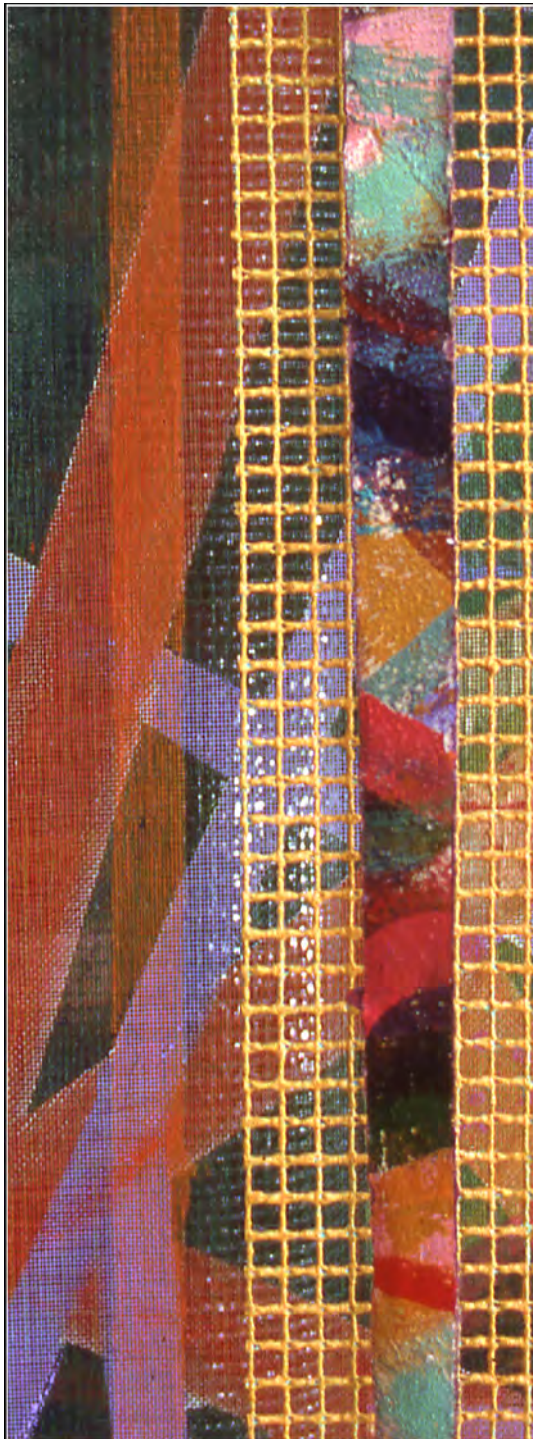
KC: So how do you see your own work taking and extending that? What do you take from it, and what is it you are leaving there?

RG: For one thing, the grid is a strong substructure in P&D and my work. However, I amplify the patterning without adopting the P&D kitsch. Process based abstraction on unstretched materials still resonates with me. To this day, I do not stretch my paintings; instead I suspend layers to create an expansive optical space beyond their borders. Likewise, I explore the materiality of paint and employ laborious processes. Much of my practice involves pouring copious amounts of paint or stamping obsessive

patterns on canvas on the floor. I do not work at an easel or on the wall. It is very physical. As I get older, I wonder how much longer I will be able to do it.

KC: We spoke briefly before we began the interview about Al Loving, who at a certain point in his career, and I think it's probably around the time you were coming into your own as an artist, did something similar. He made paintings by cutting them into strips and hanging them, and he claimed an influence of his own mother and grandmother and quilts as the inspiration for that.

RG: I was very aware of those paintings as a young artist. I was fascinated that he took painting off the wall, suspended it in space, and considered it painting. I also think of my work as painting, even though many are sculptural,



Zebo: SU 91" x 104" x 73" 1987

freestanding, and mixed media.

KC: You seem to have focused for a good while on manipulating the viewer into multiple perspectives on the work, sort of forcing them into these situations—we'll forcing them is probably not the right word...

RG: Inviting them...

KC: ...to these situations where they see it up close, they see it far away. They consider, they contemplate the detail, they step back, they see the whole—you've described it as countering the distance of a museum or gallery installation. I'm curious if you still feel that that's the norm in museums and galleries. The thing I'm curious about is that it sounds also a bit like trying to create in the viewer a sense of the formal crit that we see in our schools, when artists stand around and they're

challenged to pick a work apart and understand it from the inside out.

RG: It is more about gaining access through understanding. As a young artist, I questioned the automatic validation a museum could ascribe to a work of art. I felt it was elitist and that it undermined the power of the work to communicate to a broad range of people. My preference was and still is for art to be installed in personal spaces or for art to create a private space within a public one. Hopefully, the viewer will respond to the art over an extended period of time. Ideally, the interaction will become an intimate visual conversation that allows the cathartic ritual act of the creative process to transfer to the viewer. As an inclusive experience, the audience completes the piece. Abstraction is a visual language many do not understand.



Triag 1 90" x 48" x 25" 1987

Triag 2 90" x 48" x 25" 1987

By including something intelligible, the artist can initiate the viewer's interaction through the recognition of something familiar. I try to get people to slow down, take notice, and pay attention.

KC: You've stated that viewer interaction was necessary to complete works from a certain period in your career. To some degree I think that's true of all your work in different ways. But I think in this case, you were talking about literally manipulating their viewing experience, that at a certain point you required audiences, participants, viewers, however you want to describe them, to physically handle and manipulate the work. You said that it had failed. Can you talk about that?

RG: At one point, I made work that I thought should be "played" by the viewer. The pieces took the form

of games or had components that could be physically moved or rolled to change the sequencing or imagery. Unfortunately, even if installed in an alternative space with plenty of signage and directions, people were reluctant to touch the art. If they did, they played according to social norms. Instead of creating something unique, they competed as if they could win or lose. That was not my intent, nor was it satisfying. I no longer think it is necessary for the viewer to physically manipulate my art to experience it in a meaningful way. Now, I am content if it initiates a purely visual and conceptual exchange.

KC: You say you've always been interested in the properties of paint, and we talked about the process as being very important to you earlier. It sounds almost like an inner formalist coming to terms with a



Oku-1 84" x 30" x 30" 1986-1987

Oku-4 84" x 24" x 30" 1986

postmodern impulse. I think you came of age as a painter in this moment when there was this transition from a modernist sensibility or what we would now call a modernist versus a post modernist sensibility. So, at the point that you emerge as a professional artist, you do so in this strange moment with these contending forces. Can you talk a little bit about how they shaped you and where you see yourself in relationship to them? How that impacted you?

RG: My early training was "colored" or discussed through a formalist lens and I still enjoy looking at painting through a formalist filter. As an emerging artist, New Image painting was the rage, but I was never constrained by figuration. While I enjoy narrative, I am not compelled to tell stories through images. With

Postmodernism, anything is possible. I look for ways to keep abstraction relevant.

KC: *Color, you've talked about being very interested in color. You've talked about it as being related to your place, the time of year, the color of the light of a given moment in time and a given place. But there's also that long tradition about color and spirituality, Concerning the Spiritual in Art is that something that's...*

RG: I approach color intuitively. I do not think about the theory to make it work. Interestingly, my color sensibilities have been influenced by places I have lived. For instance, after living under the overcast skies of Upstate New York, my palette became brighter and more saturated when I moved to sunny Virginia. I use color to organize the disparate materials



Parallelogram E 96" x 34" x 16" 1985

Parallelogram C 96" x 34" x 16" 1984

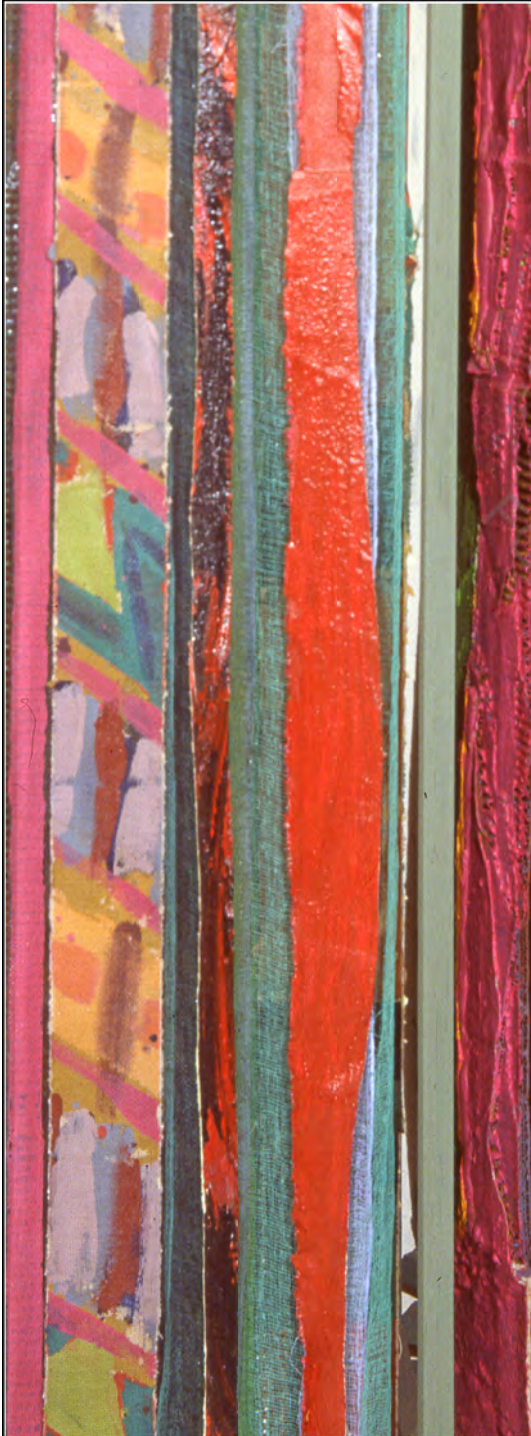
and systems I layer into my works and I use color to create an emotional charge that transforms the painting's environment.

KC: At a certain point, you abandoned found materials. Could you talk about what prompted that?

RG: At first, using found stuff was an immediate way to have a lot of collage material on hand that I did not have to make myself. I often chose things that were rusty, transparent, used or infused with history. Artists also gave me their "failed" paintings to tear up and recycle. However, I abandoned this strategy when I got tired of rectifying their mistakes. I also found manufactured materials such as cheesecloth, aluminum screen, and rug-hold could replace the inherent quality of recycled materials in similar ways. While using these new materials slowed

down my production in the studio, making everything myself from scratch improved the overall quality of my work.

KC: You've said, "I believe our culture fosters a complacent attitude of passive observation embodied in an age of fragmentation. Technology, consumerism, media, and global events completely redefine the ways we view and interact with our world." In the summary of your artist's talk, you bullet a few points relating to this notion: Counterpoint to Contemporary Visual Clutter; Extended Viewing; Emotional Charge; and Handicraft vs. Technology. One could interpret that maybe you're a bit of a Luddite. Your work, in many respects, tries to push away the contemporary world and replace it with spaces of contemplation and reflection that exist outside of time altogether.



Fan A 96" x 56" x 20" 1983

So the question is, what's with that? What's going on with this relationship you have with the contemporary world? Is that accurate? Are you looking to create these opportunities for people and maybe for yourself, to sort of step back from this sort of barrage, this carpet bombing of images that we endure on a constant basis today, and step back into a different kind of time, not back, but step into a different kind of time and space?

RG: I am trying to create an alternative space that counters visual skimming and the loss of interpersonal interaction fostered by technology. Through the media, we are relentlessly bombarded with images and information, while at the same time we are insulated from one another through social media and digital communications. Even so, I am not against technology.

I actually think it is the most singular and significant aspect of contemporary culture. Nevertheless, I lament the loss of personal engagement and I tire of the speed required to participate and keep up. In order to think clearly, calmly, and creatively, we need ways to occasionally extricate ourselves from the current hype and reconnect with our senses. Contemplative or repetitive activities, which include making and/or viewing art, offer the perfect respite for a culture increasingly chaotic and impersonal.

KC: Many studio artists are solitary workers. I just came from a conference for fine arts deans, and it was striking to me, listening to people talk about how different really studio art is from dance or theater, or even music, where there's this ensemble, a necessity of



Fan D 95" x 86" x 30" 1983

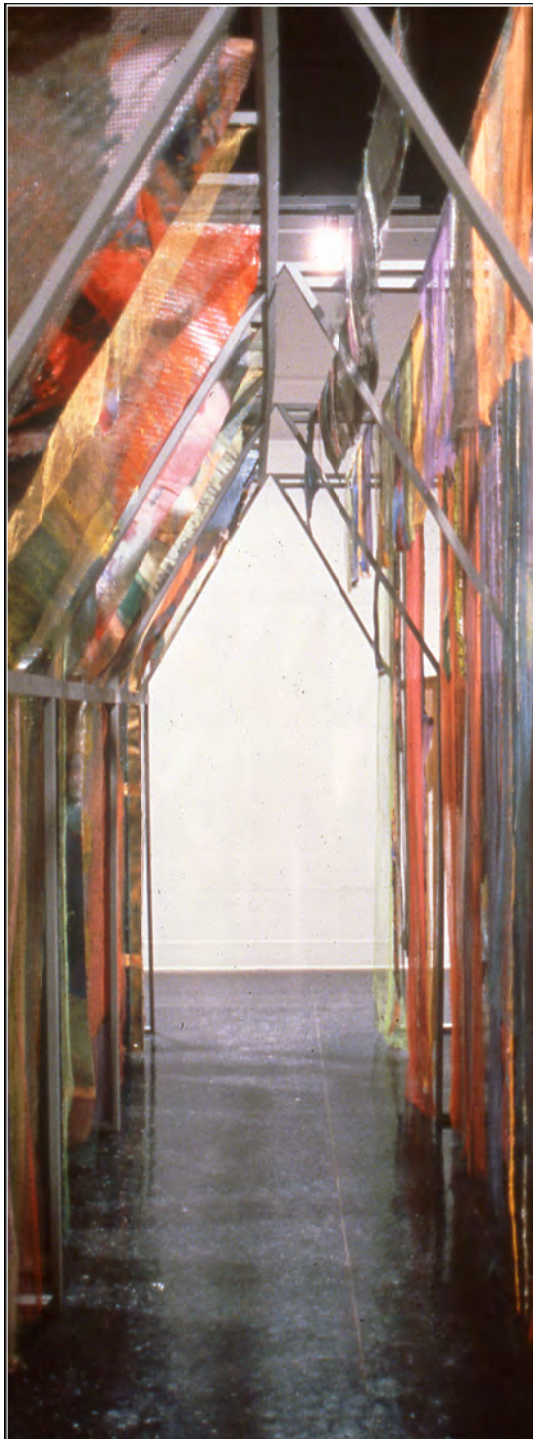
collaboration. For studio artists, generally speaking, it's almost alien; it's not common, certainly. In your case, you seek out fellowship from other artists and you are constantly putting yourself in service to other artists as well.

RG: While this is true, I spend a lot of time alone in my studio. It's actually a family joke when my kids ask where's Mom—when they know full well where to find me. I value the solitary investigation. For me, the collaboration is initiated when the artwork goes out in to the world, when I'm curating, or when I'm in the classroom. Strangely, I am reminded of a childhood tale when my mother told me my first grade teacher thought I was a born teacher. To this day, I have no clue what prompted that declaration or what she saw in me at such a tender age, but I think Sister

Ignatius was right. Teaching has been a great career path that blends seamlessly with my curatorial interests and studio practice.

KC: *So why do you do it? What do you get from these Strange Loops? You ended up with.... Actually, that was quite perfect, talking about how you were told about being a born teacher. Something is coming back to your work somehow, or the very least, it's coming back to you and it's feeding you.*

RG: I often travel in strange loops to navigate all the arenas in my life. Teaching is rewarding. Curating creates opportunities. Making art keeps me sane. I can't wait to see what comes next.



Bless This House 96" x 102" x 156" 1982
Pellucid 96" x 120" x 60" 1982

Endnote

¹Douglas Hofstadter. *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 101-102.

Note

This conversation was initiated in Gower's studio in Richmond, VA on October 29, 2011. We continued our discussion through email.

Kevin Concannon's background includes teaching, curatorial, and administrative positions at the Neuberger Museum, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), the University of Akron, and Virginia Tech, where he is currently a Professor of Art History and Director of the School of Visual Arts. His scholarship focuses on art of the 1960s, particularly the work of Yoko Ono. He has authored, co-authored and edited many important scholarly works on contemporary art that include *Agency: Art and Advertising*, (Youngstown, Ohio: McDonough Museum of Art, 2008); *YOKO ONO IMAGINE PEACE Featuring John & Yoko's Year of Peace*, (Akron, Ohio: Emily Davis Gallery, 2007); and *Mass Production: Artists' Multiples and the Marketplace*, (Akron, Ohio: Emily Davis Gallery, 2006).

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