

Saturation on MacDougal Street
A Conversation between Francesco Clemente and Raymond Foye

April 20, 2020

RF (Raymond Foye): Let's start with the motif of the seashell, which is really one of the great forms in art. It's the spiral, it's the inside out, it's the Fibonacci series of numbers. Do you want to talk a little bit about what that symbol means to you? And how it functions in these watercolors?

FC (Francesco Clemente): A trigger for these works could be the last interview that Lévi-Strauss gave when he was in his 90's. After studying human endeavor for a lifetime, he said that all he was left with was something similar to the impression you receive when you look at an empty seashell and you see the iridescence on the shell. The only memory he was left with was the memory of a few human artifacts, and of their grace.

RF: Beautiful. In addition to the symbolism in Hinduism, Buddhism, and practically every world religion, there's also a sound element. The seashell, the conch shell, is possibly the first musical instrument. There's an aural quality to it, and I know that's important to you in your work, isn't it?

FC: All of these things don't come to mind when I make the work, but it is absolutely true that the seashell is also the conch that the sadhu, the wandering Indian ascetic, plays. When Joseph Beuys made *Palazzo Regale*, his last work and in a way his own testament and grave, he included cymbals, to signify the heartbeat, and the shell, to signify the breath. Breathing is the first music, and the first manifestation of creation, the spirit.

RF: And you put the dates in all of these?

FC: I may do that for the rest of my life! Add big intrusive dates. A trigger for this could be that in the past year, I've been looking at *ukiyo-e*, Japanese prints. *Ukiyo-e* are always filled with graphic intrusions, bits of writing, and all kinds of fragments patched into the image. These create a disturbance, but I'm attracted to disturbances.

RF: It's a big help to art historians! The Zervos catalogue is marvelous for that reason, the letters of Van Gogh as well, because you can really get down to—within a couple of days—when something was made. It is a big help to us!

FC: Well, I have also been fascinated when I saw exact dates in other artists' works, seeing how much they can do in a few days. To write down the dates can express an aspiration, maybe.

RF: I also thought it might have something to do with the exigency of this moment, that you're somehow marking these days.

FC: Yes, the reason I said I'll include a date in all my works for the rest of my life is that I am very keen on accepting that these days aren't any different than the days that came before and the days that will follow. I think only the nature of our awareness has shifted, but the situation is exactly the same. From the beginning to the end, it's always the same.

RF: Has your life has changed in these days? Not really? When I think of you in the early days, in Italy, in the world of Arte Povera, or when I think of you in India, you were working in a very monastic way, with very few materials. Of all the artists I know, probably your life has changed the least right now.

FC: An eccentric friend of mine is a mystic. He always says, "No more beginnings." No more beginnings means no more interruptions. One should just be like water, just flowing, and without these clutches of the beginning, the end, the completion, the ambition. No, it will be better just to flow.

RF: Did you make these works at home? Are you still going to your studio?

FC: Yes, I am going to the studio. I have a protocol with my assistant, so we are both isolated from each other, but I do go to the studio. My studio is where I make more complex works, larger paintings. But the watercolors I made on MacDougal Street, where I live. The images are of shells, but there are also images of toys that are floating out of the ocean to the shore. Actually, the key image that I had in mind was the image of the shifting line where the water touches the land, the shifting line of separation, the ambiguity of the shore. The equivalent of twilight, a time where the light is uncertain, the light is undefined. The place in between, which has always been a subject, maybe *the* subject of what I make. The space in between, the gap between identities, the gap between stylistic solutions, the gap between soft and harsh.

RF: And between the body and the outside world?

FC: The body as the gap between the inner world and the outer world.

RF: I remember Gelek Rinpoche once talking about the bardo. He said there are millions of bardos. There's a bardo between two moments, there's a bardo between two thoughts. I thought that was an interesting insight.

FC: And before him, Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Consciousness can be described as continuity of discontinuity." To familiarize oneself with discontinuity seems a reasonable goal for a life.

RF: I remember as a child, being at the beach, watching the waves come in, and noticing how each wave made a very thin line on the shoreline, which was then erased by the next wave. I was fascinated by those lines. Did you have that experience?

FC: Yes, absolutely. It's a very vivid image that you're giving me, of this line marking and erasing the shore. In a way it reminds me of how I look at drawing. When you draw there is

the literal line, but with the line you make you are also suggesting other lines. The lines are not dogmatic. As in music, in drawing there are overtones, lines implying other lines that are not really there, but they are.

RF: I imagine in watercolor you're actually recreating that experience of an aqueous edge to things.

FC: Yes, the balance between control and renunciation is what attracts me to watercolor.

RF: I like how you're always very true to the material that you're working with. If it's pastel, it's very dry and pigmented. Every material seems to be very true to its nature.

FC: That's because I have to make up everything that happens. I don't have any academic training. I approach mediums in the same way an actor would approach a play. I try to get into the part and see if the part comes to life.

RF: What are you reading presently?

FC: The Vasistha Yoga, I have an old Motilal Banarsidass edition stolen from the library of the Theosophical Society forty years ago. The essence of the book is the idea of synchronicity, the idea that cause and effect are an appearance and that events happen in harmony with one another like parts of a song. Reality is like a song rather than like a mechanical gadget. It's not a very practical way to look at life, but it is a view which definitely cheers me up.

RF: Are you listening to anything during these days?

FC: Always the same things we both listen to—Bob Dylan.

RF: We've gotten three Bob Dylan songs in the last three weeks, that's one thing to be thankful to this situation for! We just finished working on a book on your work from the 1980's together, and the text that I wrote focused quite a bit on the poets who you were friends with, and who you worked with. I think of the Beats all the time, but especially in these days, which are so momentous. I miss that big view that they had, and what they could give us today.

FC: Actually, the book we're making covers work from the 1980's until now. I definitely miss Allen Ginsberg, whom I met through you, and whom I collaborated with on a number of illuminated manuscripts. It is a paradox that Ginsberg did not have a particularly visual sensibility when looking at paintings, but at the same time his poetry is so rich with powerful images. I can never forget when he came to the memorial for the great civil rights lawyer, William Kunstler, and recited "The Ballad of The Skeletons," a poem where in death everyone becomes the same, all the activist discourses were put into perspective. Ginsberg had a formidable skill to put everything in a compassionate perspective. He would be embarrassed if he heard me say this; he didn't like to think of himself as the lion

of dharma, but he really was, a lion of compassion. But once, when I called him that, he said, “No, I am just a coward like everybody else.”

RF: What else is going on in the studio? Are you working on some large-scale paintings?

FC: Here at home I am working on the watercolor series, and in the studio, after a few years’ hiatus I have been working again with milk paint, casein. The paint you find on antique Shaker furniture. I love those bluish greys and grayish blues—I love that surface.

RF: It’s very chalky.

FC: Very chalky, and it’s very serene. It’s a very serene surface, which somehow, I think, goes well with this present year.

RF: The palette is a serene one as well, you don’t really get any strong colors, do you?

FC: It’s a pastel palette, so all the colors are broken. The overtones I described earlier, talking of drawing, happen here with color. The blue is a blue, but it resonates of grey. The red is a red, but it’s also something else. All the colors are in-between colors.

RF: I’ve noticed of your life as an artist, observing it over the years, it seems like, although there are periods of rest, mostly you rest by changing from one body of work to another. You refresh yourself by changing media, and switching into another mode of making, rather than just stopping. Is that a fair comment?

FC: Yes, everything I make belongs to an imaginary collection. It is as if I am an archeologist and I find new, forgotten families of artifacts, forgotten underground labyrinths, forgotten painted caves, forgotten shipwrecks. I go from one finding to another, and every new finding, in a way, is liberating from the one before. I can leave whatever I made before behind. It doesn’t make the life of my audience easy, because as soon as you embrace a certain body of work, I leave it behind for another. I am getting used to the fact that I can’t expect everyone to follow me everywhere. I finally am accepting that!

RF: Don’t you think that change and mutability really are the great subjects of all art, in a way?

FC: I do believe that change is *the* subject of art, yes. I believe the acceptance of change is everything. A poet will only write a poem if they need to, and all my favorite artists have that quality of inevitability. They are never in a neutral space, everything they touch is so, whether it is good or bad.

RF: Yes, there is always a strong urgency there. Some of the artists that I am thinking of these days—frankly I think about them all the time; I think we are very much on the same page in admiring artists like Cy Twombly and Brice Marden. These are artists who have

worked in a very quiet, meditative, or reclusive mode in their lives. Are these artists who you strongly relate to, and who continue to have a lot of meaning for you?

FC: Yes, I do relate to their work. When I was an aspiring, very young artist, I used to walk a particular street in Rome and see Twombly walking in the opposite direction. It was a great help for me to see how he lived with antiquity, as if antiquity was a living thing. I always liked to think Twombly looked at antiquity in the same as Alberto Savinio. Savinio, writer, composer, and painter, brother of de Chirico, wrote that ancient Greece was not the colorless land of white marble imagined by the English and the Germans, ancient Greece was the land of the goat and of the monkey. I always thought Twombly knew that and saw antiquity as a living thing, and Brice Marden also. The difference is that Marden sees the sea and the mountains in the background of the monkeys and the goats.

RF: You have a remark that I quote all the time, where you say that painting is the last oral tradition. I love that.

FC: The reason I might have thought that, is again, I don't have any academic training. Everything I really learned was by looking at artists I admired and not necessarily interacting with them, but just looking at them and trying to imagine who they were and how they were getting to that place in the mind.

EJS: Some ideas for the exhibition title are "Saturation of Color" and "Saturation on MacDougal Street." These watercolors are so rich in color, and I wondered if you could speak about that a bit.

RF: The whole subject of color is endlessly fascinating and mystical. I think it was Norman Bluhm who said, "When it comes to color, nobody knows a damn thing." As much as you study it, it's always kind of a mystery, even a form of mysticism. How do you relate to color? How does it function for you?

FC: I didn't know this quote—it's wonderful! Color is the medium of emotion. And just as no one knows a thing about emotions, no one knows a thing about colors. Because emotions are not objects, they are subjects. They come into the picture on their own. It is very important to learn from emotions. It is equally important to learn from color. If you do, you stop believing in your delusional persona, the actor, and you realize you are being acted upon. You are not the actor, you are the acted. Saturation is contrary to the nature of watercolor, watercolor is about transparency. But somehow when I make watercolors—particularly in India, where the light is very bright and washes off color, I go against the nature of watercolor and I soak the color in. And why this is, I don't know. Maybe to turn water into earth, the permanence of the ground against the impermanence of water.

RF: Watercolor is also a medium that, especially in the way you use it, makes me not only aware of the image, but also the making of that image. And yet, what a personal thing color is at the same time. When we talk about artists and say, "So-and-so is a great colorist," what does that mean? It's like when you say about a singer, "They have great phrasing."

FC: Music is something you have to have an ear for, and color is something you have to have an eye for.

RF: There are so many kinds of colorists, aren't there? Maybe it's about harmonizing. It's everything. As soon as you define it, it's something else.

FC: The difference between great color and not so great color is in an infinitesimal quantity, it is almost imperceptible like the line separating love from hate.

RF: And of course, color is another area in which nature is the great teacher.

FC: Yes, nature defies our expectations, if we are capable to see ourselves separate from her, that is. The Pope, the other day, said, "God always forgives, man forgives sometimes, nature never forgives."