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IN CONVERSATION

JOSEPHINE HALVORSON with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui

A few days after the opening reception of her exhibit *What Looks Back* at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (October 21–December 4, 2011), the painter Josephine Halvorson stopped by the *Rail*'s headquarters to talk with publisher Phong Bui about her life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): When we first met at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Residency last year (2009–2010), I remember that you spoke of a class that you took with Alex Katz when you were an undergraduate at Cooper Union and how you felt that it had a significant impact on your thinking about art and life. Could you discuss the experience of being in that class?

Josephine Halvorson: Sure. It was an informal four-class seminar (in 2002), and wasn't about his work per se, which I've always admired. Rather, he was trying to open our eyes to how art functions in the world. He wanted us to be aware of context—institutions, the people who are involved in art's production and reception—so that by breaking down the walls of institutions we could see art for what it really is. I remember him mentioning how the Whitney is different from the Guggenheim, and the Guggenheim is different from MoMA, etc. And similarly, he would have us go out and look at Prada or GAP and see the differences between them. In other words, once those institutional contexts become more transparent you can be more clear about the intention of your work. He also told us about the various arcs of his career. I remember him describing how he was out of favor in the '50s when he was getting started because of Abstract Expressionism, and then in the spotlight in the '60s. He was out again in the '70s, only to come right back in the '80s. He wasn't as popular in the '90s, and then he said, "You know, I think the next decade is going to be great." And here he is showing at Gavin Brown, where he's once again part of a relevant dialogue with younger artists. That really blew my mind because I'm 30 and the last decade has been dense with art and life experiences. Taking the long-term view has allowed me to both relax into my practice and push myself forward. Seeing Alex in the flesh and being able to identify with him, since he'd gone to Cooper Union as well, helped me to realize the possibility of a dedicated path, so it was very inspiring for me in that sense.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: Let's go back to your early history: You were born in '81 in Brewster, which is a coastal town in

Massachusetts with a very small population, less than 10,000. And you have revealed in the past how having grown up in your parents' metal and blacksmithing shop instilled an early attraction to the solid surfaces of industrial objects. But when were you first exposed to art?

Halvorson: Well, both of my parents had been artists: My father taught art and made kinetic metal sculptures. My mom had studied painting and of course it was metal which became her medium. When I wasn't in school I was in their shop making things out of sheet copper and steel. We didn't have a TV at the time so instead I read books, played outside, and made art. I remember being, at the age of 6 or 7, very competitive with my mother, because we spent a lot of time drawing each other and it drove me crazy that I couldn't make as good of a drawing. And since I grew up as an only child I didn't really have a sibling to compare myself to, so my frustration was very apparent. *[Laughs.]* Ultimately my mother stopped drawing because she wanted me to just be able to draw and not compare my drawings to hers.

Rail: That's amazing. Your mother is a saint.

Halvorson: She is. Anyway, Cape Cod is not that far away from New York and has a long history of artists who spend their summers there. So it was there, at the age of 10 or 11, that I saw the first painting I remember in a gallery context—a painting of a boat on the water by Paul Resika. It was atmospheric and abstract, and I remember it had an effect on me.

Rail: What kind of experience did you have in high school? Because I can only imagine, given how competitive Cooper Union is, that the portfolio you sent in was more than just a demonstration of technical skills.

Halvorson: It was the only art school that I applied to because I wasn't sure that I wanted to be an artist or go to art school, partly because I was interested in mathematics, history, and other academic subjects. Despite an instinct that I was an artist inside, I wasn't sure that art was the only option. Besides, my public high school had only a barebones art program at the time, so I had taken life drawing classes elsewhere and studied painting during the summers on the beach in Provincetown. I also took a painting class at the Museum School in Boston, where my mom had gone. So there was a divide between my interest in painting and drawing and my academic work, which I didn't quite know how to reconcile then, other than a few forays such as forging a Viking sword for a history class. But I did apply to Cooper because it was free and I really wanted to be in New York City, so when I was accepted it started to become clear that there was a real possibility of becoming an artist.

Rail: And then in your junior year (2002) you went to Yale Norfolk. What was your experience like in that intensive six-week summer program?

Halvorson: It was interesting because I was coming from Cooper, which has a completely interdisciplinary curriculum. Though I loved painting more than anything, I took classes in photography, art history, film, video, sculpture, among others. In fact one of the best courses I took at Cooper was a graphic design class with Philippe Apeloig, a graphic designer and typographer whose work I continue to find so inspiring. But at the same time I wanted to make space for painting. At Yale Norfolk it was pretty much just 25, 26 kids who were really there to paint. And Sam Messer was such a good teacher because he understood young people's concerns about what being an artist is, specifically those making paintings, what kind of language of expression they should have, and so on. Sam would say, "Just make a painting! Don't think about it—just do it!" So by the end of the term everyone was feeling uninhibited, setting up a French easel or making paintings on the walls, on the floors. We became very playful. It was extraordinary. I remember Siri Hustvedt and Paul Auster, who visited as critics, and I was making these long paintings, 1 by 8 feet, portraits that were hanging one on top of the other, and Siri said they were okay individually, but they were much more interesting together, which spurred me to spend the next year making paintings that were in a diptych format,

exploring how they relate to one another and how everything didn't have to be in every painting. That was an important moment.

Rail: Had you ever made abstract paintings while you were a student at Cooper?

Halvorson: Yes, I did. They were in between geometric abstraction and painterly expressionism, but essentially never added up to anything other than some kind of material experimentation. I made a series of paintings of books, somewhat abstracted, where I was thinking about the metaphorical parallels between books and paintings.

Rail: After having graduated from Cooper in 2003, you applied to spend one whole year in Vienna, Austria on a Fulbright. Why Austria and not elsewhere?

Halvorson: My proposal was to paint portraits in relation to both psychology and expressionism in painting. In other words, what's the relationship of me, the artist, to a subject—whether it's a person, an object, an environment, or whatever—and how can painting address this question in ways that other forms of art can't. Even though the work I made there was adequate, it was a tremendous period of growth for me as an artist. That year opened up the question of how to make a painting relate to a place. This of course has become the bedrock of my current practice, now looking back. I had already been interested in the question of "provincial" painting—and had investigated it through work I made on a grant to California in 2002. But it was only in Vienna that I seriously started wondering about how a place—its physical, cultural, historical environment—manifests itself in a painting. It still doesn't seem right that I could be making the same work out of a studio in New York or an apartment in Vienna.

Rail: But let me shift a little bit to my early experience of seeing your work. It was winter of 2008 (November 7, 2008 – January 10, 2009) at the side space at Sikkema Jenkins. And in addition to my own reading of it, I thought Litia Perta's meditation was very thoughtful: She began associating one of the paintings, "Dirty Window" (2008) to a similar window that she was sitting next to on the train—slightly slanted, with black rims and all kinds of scuffs and stains on the glass. And then she went on describing its legitimacy as far as how it opened up, or insisted on stillness, which is the opposite of the constant motion that our technology enforces on our lives. She considered that a radical act, as do I. And in 2009 when you had another show at Monya Rowe, both Roberta Smith and Peter Schjeldahl wrote two perceptive and timely reviews. While Roberta describes them as behaving both ways, somewhere between flatness and illusionism, Peter thought of them as being strikingly tough and tender. I like Roberta's description, "relaxed rendering of shadow," which is nearly the same as Peter's "the brushstroke sensate, and the color ticklish." Do you first see the object of your desire, then immediately conceive or equate it to a particular scale or size of the painting, depending on whether in each case it should be identical, larger, or smaller in proportion?

Halvorson: Definitely. The canvas is a big part of the ongoing negotiation between me and the object. In the past I've tried to plan out specific measurements in a prepared canvas, then take it out to a painting site, but it tends to feel contrived. So I've learned to literally just pull off the road and go for it, with whatever canvases I've got in the back of the car. And I think that's important because spontaneity can allow for a more fluid correspondence between the object, the canvas and paint, and



"Mine Site," 2011. Oil on linen. 29 × 39 inches.
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

my own perception. Otherwise, as far as the subject of scale is concerned, especially with this new body of paintings, the different surfaces of various objects that I am painting are pretty much always at an arm's length away; I mean I could reach out and touch them if I wanted to. The best-case scenario is when I'm painting, it feels as if I'm feeling that object through the brushstroke, or I'm reimagining what it means to be that object, in paint, so a lot of what I'm after is this correspondence between the object and the paint mediated through me.

Rail: You're a conduit, certainly.

Halvorson: Yes. But also the object is a conduit between me and my materials, and the materials mediate my relationship to the object, and so on. So in a lot of ways scale is just another element that adds to the further understanding of that relationship.

Rail: The reason I'm asking about this issue of scale is partly because none of the paintings bear the identical measurements.

Halvorson: That's right. I'm more interested in the way that an object asserts itself, describes itself in a way that speaks to me. These are very active objects in the world. They reciprocate my gesture to paint them. So their scale is often translated psychologically. I'm sure you've been to a space and have remembered it as very big or very small and then it's quite different when you return. Sometimes an object feels huge when it's not or the inverse. Alternatively, scale in my work is sometimes determined purely on a perceptual basis, where the distance of the canvas to the object reduces the literal scale of the object and brings it over, smaller, at exactly the scale of the canvas.

Rail: A good example of that is "Barrier" (2011), where the scale is similar but the size is a little bigger.

Halvorson: That's an important distinction for the work. A lot of paintings in the show that you saw in 2008, for instance, were primarily made in France when I was living there, painting outside as part of my practice for the first time—which, by the way, was great. In France, as you know, no one thinks anything of you if you have a French easel because it's more popular there; I wasn't as shy as I might have been in New York. And they were painted at a further distance, typically about 10 to 15 feet away from the object. But with this current show the objects I painted are really within, as I said, an arm's reach. And when you look at something that close it does expand your periphery. It also intensifies a relationship to the body, in terms of tactility, as opposed to looking at them from a distance. Also, I'm still committed to the idea of an individual-scale artistic practice where I can carry my materials by myself, tuck my canvas under my arm, put it in my car and go.

Rail: Very manageable production.

Halvorson: Definitely. And I like it being a spontaneous practice instead of a premeditated one. Of course this doesn't mean the paintings always work out. I have a high attrition rate, maybe one in four turns out to be a compelling painting, so there is an editing process to my work, not unlike one more commonly associated with photography.

Rail: When did the shift from working with set-up still lifes in the studio to painting on various sites take place? And what was the impulse behind it?

Halvorson: Towards the end of graduate school (Columbia University), I realized that I'd never been successful at making art in a studio. I hope that someday I can because it would probably be cheaper and logistically easier in relation to what I'm currently doing. *[Laughs.]* Anyway, I had been making still lifes—setting up what were essentially sculptures (which, by the way, were ultimately better than the paintings of them)—and painting them perceptually. I knew I was interested in language and representation as a way of being part of a shared world. I was interested in perception and the body, and painting as an object first and foremost. I was setting up these still lifes and thinking, "Okay, if there's an object here, another there..." Quite similar to what Siri Hustvedt had said about how one

painting can relate to the other. I therefore ended up making these paintings that were like language games, each one like a rebus—this plus this plus this equals . . . and so on. But the problem was I never had an idea of what it should add up to, what it should “say.” And yet everyone who looked at my paintings expected an answer, which was exactly the opposite of what I wanted to achieve in a painting. I think about painting as being very open and giving in terms of meaning. But at the same time, I became aware that with still life paintings, objects can function as coded placeholders for a narrative and therefore can be contrived, which is both good and bad. But for me, my own ability to control or not control the practice in the studio was too airtight and hermetic, which was, again, exactly the opposite of what I had hoped to do through painting. So, feeling that I reached the limit of my ability to construct meaning through representation, and establishing these parallels with language, I thought, “Well, what now? How can I use representation in a way that doesn’t beg a story?” Then I realized that I wanted the relationships to exist within a singular object, rather than among them; what would it mean to take these various objects and paint them each as a singular painting instead of together as a group? I also discovered that found objects allowed for more openness. This led to the idea of painting outdoors in a single go, which was so fun. Also, I’ve never been able to revisit a painting because of this psychological issue of accumulations, additives or—

Rail: Choking the air out of painting.

Halvorson: [Laughs.] And as you know, the greater facility you have with the material the harder it gets to keep it in check and open. And I’ve found that being outside in various conditions, whether it’s climate, social, whatever, tempers my own control and generates a quicker rhythm. I’ve learned to push back the analytical to long after the painting is made, rather than before I pick up a brush.

Rail: That makes perfect sense. In any case, in the same review that Roberta wrote she also mentioned late Manet, Morandi, and William Nicholson in reference to your paintings and I can understand and see how each would refer to the shared sensitivity of intimacy without giving up rigorous observation of the chosen object. For Manet, in the last remaining few months of his life—he died young at 51 (1883) due to untreated syphilis, rheumatism, that in fact led to the amputation of one leg—he was forced to reduce both the scale and the scope of his paintings. And he could only apply his energy for an hour or two, in each seated position, to one painting at a time. At first glance, one might see that as a symbol of his fragility, but when one looks closely there is no betrayal of his painterly faculties. There were no more than 16 paintings of floral bouquets.

Halvorson: Oh yeah, I love them. I also have the book (*The Last Flowers of Manet*, Abradale Press, Harry N. Abrams, 1986) of those. I look at them frequently.

Rail: With Andrew Forge’s text (and Robert Gordon’s selections from Manet’s intimate letters and contemporary documents, translated by Richard Howard). As with Morandi, who, after his association with the Metaphysical school went back to Bologna to live with his mother and sister and paint still lifes with bottles, desired to be near



Cézanne, without the Cézanne-ness anxiety. William Nicholson is also an interesting comparison, in that he was neither an academic nor an overt Modernist. He is generally more known today as an illustrator—he made woodcuts for the Queen, the author of *An Almanac of Twelve Sports* and *An Illustrated Alphabet*—than he is a painter. Actually, I was thinking of two other American painters: John F. Peto, the hyperrealist trompe l'oeil painter, and Walter (Tandy) Murch, the painterly painter of machine parts, brick fragments, haunting light bulbs, and lemons, both of whose works Jasper Johns admires.



"Sign Holders," 2010. Oil on linen. 40 × 30". Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

Halvorson: There's this preoccupation with Americans being eager to get their own history out there, to ensure their history is archived and conveyed, maybe a residual competition with the great histories of Europe, especially in terms of art? But yes, I love both their work very much. I actually had moments while I was making a painting and all of a sudden I would realize, "Oh! Peto. Oh! Murch," or "Oh! Minimalism," or something. I'm always just bumping into these different associations. For instance, I made this cardboard painting ("Cardboard Template," 2011), and numbers of people at the opening said that it reminded them of Braque, Picasso, and Cubism. Essentially, I love art, I love painting, so what gets to be indexed in my head will be there forever, therefore I never have to think of a work by any particular artist really, although there have been times when I am conscious of it and I think, "Well goddamnit, I can do that, too. It's not off limits because someone else has done it." And that's something I love about Nicholson, because he really took the subjects of objects that he paints as his own.

Rail: You're right. That's why he could paint still life, landscape, or portraiture as he wished.

Halvorson: Exactly. Incidentally, I only found out later that Margery Williams's *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which I read as a child, was illustrated by him. Actually, it was Merlin James who introduced me to William Nicholson because he contributed an essay to the catalogue of his retrospective at the Royal Academy in 2005.

Rail: Which followed soon after a wonderful show at Paul Kasmin, who is, according to David Cohen in his review, a descendent of Nicholson.

Halvorson: Wow, that's really interesting. At any rate, as artists, I think we should take in the things we love, digest them, and figure out what it means later. And once it's digested you may be able to come up with something new and fresh. But the best part is when your own art looks back at you and you think, "Oh, well I guess that's what was on my mind." You know? "I guess I do think of painting as a frame, as a surface, a record. I guess I am American." [*Laughs.*] Peto is a painter I came to know fairly recently, as opposed to Raphaele Peale, whose paintings I'm more familiar with partly because of Alexander Nemerov's wonderful book *The Body of Raphaele Peale: Still Life And Selfhood 1812-1824* where he redefines still life through the language of phenomenology.

Rail: Anyway, I have a technical question: Do you use any ground color or simply use the white of the linen to bounce off light from underneath?

Halvorson: I never start off with a colored ground, mostly because I work in a single session. I spend much of my time mixing color. Color is extremely important to me in that I want to make colors that you can't quite name, or you can't quite figure out how they got there, colors that are so literal the painting becomes its own fact. Often we're told that optically we see value before color. And that color is this elusive, slippery, scientific kind of substance, a coating on the real. But for me it's actually the opposite: Color is what gives identity to form. In this particular show, I was really thinking about the literalness of color, so a lot of these were painted on cloudy days where the color was consistent and the light quite neutral. In the case of "Barrier," I can't remember if overall I would call it orange, red, or mauve. In fact, if you look at that part of the facade that's in shadow, it is a mixture of purple and brown. And I like that, because those colors define this particular object in that moment in time.

Rail: Color ticklish. [Laughs.] Another thing that I would like to bring up is that most of the objects you have painted—let’s pick a few from this show, for example, “Sign Holders” (2010), “Steam Donkey Valve” (2011), “Green Machine” (2011), “Plank Door” (2010) wear certain patinas, which is the accumulation of their histories. Have you ever had the desire to paint things that are just newly made?

Halvorson: [Laughs.] Yes, and I have tried to paint new objects, on many occasions. But I should clarify that I don’t think of it so much as a patina. Rather, I think of the quality of any object as revealing its history through its physical form, which is exactly how I think about paintings. I like to look at paintings and see how they were made. Even when I look at the caves at Lascaux or at shards of a Roman fresco, I can see the trace of someone who made it. There’s so much humanity in that, and that’s something I love about painting. Similarly, this correspondence again between the object and the painting: I like to understand how it was made—its own history, its functionality—through simply looking and touching. This doesn’t mean I don’t try to understand objects which aren’t obvious about their mechanisms. For instance, for a big Cooper Union alumni show that Tom Micchelli put together last year, I had proposed to paint up in the mechanical room of the new building. So I painted the motherboard of the system that controls all the air, the heat, and the mechanics of the whole building, and it had all these lights and wires, it was brand new. And the painting ended up being more about how the materiality of paint failed the subject or didn’t correspond to its value at all. That’s partly probably why I’m drawn to objects that carry that history on them, or machines where you can understand the mechanics just by looking. And I often think, “What if I became a computer engineer? I’d probably end up painting different things, because I’d understand how circuits work.” My practice is one of understanding an object in time: Its history, its function, its place in the world, its environment. It’s not about making a picture of it so much. It’s not about the topic of the industrial past or what remains, what’s discarded. Though I am interested in history, what makes me paint is the ability to see something, and just by looking and possibly touching it, using my own body to understand how it works and what it is.

Rail: If you go around to different sites, you allow yourself to look at an object, touch it if you need to, and then maybe reflect on it on the way home before deciding whether you would go back and paint it or not.

Halvorson: That’s exactly right. I always say I spend 70 percent of my time not talking myself out of painting something. I have to be really tuned in so that when I do see something I can hear it calling to me, or catch its eye looking back. This is the only way I can describe it.

Rail: How much time do you spend in going out and looking at different possibilities?

Halvorson: A lot of time. Though Brooklyn is my home, I spend the summers, holidays, and days in between teaching out of the city. I’m nomadic. I like to escape, I like driving, and I like exploring. I make one or two paintings a week on site.

Rail: You’re not a studio painter.

Halvorson: It’s looking that way. And it’s tricky, because I don’t want to go to strange places as a



"Barrier," 2011. Oil on linen, 36 × 42". Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

tourist, neither am I drawn to paint the surroundings that I'm familiar with. I spend a lot of time alone and wherever I am I'm always looking. And a lot of times—this has happened on more than one occasion—the thing I choose to paint disappears. And this is one of those things where initially I thought, “Well what a great affirmation of my practice, because this object was in fact calling out to me.” And now I'm getting spooked out by it because I'm starting to second guess myself. For instance, this happened recently when I was in Death Valley.

Rail: How did you get there?

Halvorson: Well, last March I was painting in Mendocino County, California and it was raining so intensely that you couldn't even see out of your windshield. And I paint in rain, but I couldn't paint in this rain. After several days of it not letting up, I looked at a weather map and Death Valley was the only place on the west coast where it wasn't raining. It was a 12-hour drive away, so I packed up the car and drove there, staying in a dusty RV park. This is a very remote area. And just by wandering around, I discovered there's this whole history of mining there. And then I met a man who wrote a book about the history of the town—just extraordinary. I eventually found this abandoned silver and lead mining site about 12 miles outside of town on the face of a mountain. At the site I found this huge, two-ton probably, diesel compressor, which used to power all the equipment at the site, and someone had tipped it over and spray-painted the word “Shame” on it. It was one of the best objects I've ever seen: It had language, time, and mechanics—all the stuff I'm interested in. So of course I tried to paint it, but the wind, which was at least 50 miles per hour, broke my easel, destroyed the painting. I ended up having to paint out of the back of my car, and that's when I did “Mine Site” (2011). But I kept thinking, “Well, I'll just go back after the heat of the summer and do the painting of the compressor then.” So it was early October, just last month, the last possible week I could go when it would be cool enough so my paint didn't melt, but also before my show opened. Peter came with me, we flew to Las Vegas, rented a car, drove two hours to Tecopa, spent the night. The next morning, I'm all ready to go and paint this machine, I'm so excited, this is the one painting I would want for my show, but once we got up there, this two tons of steel compressor was gone! It had been there since before World War II. I had just seen it 6 months ago. It's truly the one that got away. It was actually very emotional. Michael Jenkins recently asked me, “How emotional is your work?” and I said that once a painting is finished, it will, ideally, take on a life of its own. It feels separate from me. But while in the making of it, it's very emotional. And when I was up there at the mining site in the desert with only the empty concrete foundation, I was very upset. It was as if the machine had been dying and I didn't make it back in time. I should have seen that the word “Shame” which was etched on its side was of course a forewarning. And now it's gone and I'll never see it again. Someone took it to melt it down, to get a few hundred dollars. There's something about this object which speaks to loss—not just that it evaded my painting of it, but in a broader sense in this case, the mining industry. And these mountains still have loads of silver and lead in them. You look across the landscape; you can see the streaks right through them. But it's not cost-effective, I suppose, to pay people to mine in America anymore. It's cheaper to buy it from somewhere else. So, yes, I am interested in what gets left behind, and how painting can breathe new life into the world. This is the basis of my interest in still life, how this genre can elevate the quotidian, the overlooked, the left-behind. My work is really about—and this might sound hokey, but it's very real for me—listening to things which want to be painted. And then going for it. It doesn't always mean the paintings work out. [*Laughs.*] But it's the experience that counts.

Rail: What's the longest time you have spent on one painting and what is the shortest time it took you to paint another?

Halvorson: In this show, “Cracked Back” (2011) was the shortest one, perhaps four or five hours. This was in winter and I was painting the back of our wood stove, which had cracked because of the heat over time. The heat was the cause of the color shift as well—that's why there is the slightly bluish aura in the middle of it. And I love that the



color of the object was changed by its own malfunction. As for the longest one: over the summer I made a painting called “Mastic” (2011), not in the show, which took three days. Actually, it was painted at Yale Norfolk, of a wall with the cement residue that once held a mirror. The reason why it took me three days to complete was because I had a stomach bug, which I ended up going to the hospital for in the middle of this painting. Not to mention it was during Hurricane Irene—losing electricity at one point, and so on. Otherwise, the longest I have painted in a day is 20 hours straight. A painting in the show, “Inlaid Stones” (2011), was one of several paintings that I made this past summer in England. The site was about five hours away from my partner Peter’s family home. I was out there from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. I didn’t see anyone all day. I got to witness the whole arc of the day in the painting. It was raining—it was so quiet and so still. I don’t listen to music when I work, so all the ambient sounds were wonderful. I remember at one point thinking, “There’s no world outside of this painting. I know that New York exists, I know people exist, but all I know right now is this.” That degree of focus is something I really strive for in my work. It’s not quite right to talk about the time it takes to make these paintings in terms of hours, however. There’s a period of finding the subject, which can take years of observation, the time it takes to logistically set up and pack up, and, as I mentioned earlier, the editing process, which requires a lot of patience. Back at the studio some paintings improve over time, and some fall away. The latter I cut out and burn.



“Cracked Back,” 2011. Oil on linen, 18 × 14”. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

Rail: Can you tell us about how the titles appear the way they do like a poem on the cards?

Halvorson: That’s a part of my practice which is increasingly important. It’s an elastic expression from the group as a whole. And I do think of the individual paintings as words in a sentence or phrases in a poem, essentially constructed from literal titles of the painted object in each painting. The card is a way to linguistically constitute what are the things that look back and, at the same time, evoke the meaning of the group as a whole. I can’t make that “poem-list” until the show is installed, which means that the expression that results is one final surprise.

Rail: They evoke that painting from observation is not obsolete, and it should not be considered as an impediment to postmodernist practice.

Halvorson: I agree. With my students, I don’t even talk about abstraction and representation, because I think we’re beyond that. I think we’re at a time where everything is abstract and everything is representational. It’s more about how you find your own language with paint. It’s really just your body and its relationship to the world. Using the senses is not anti-intellectual.