

**Interview Udo Kittelmann and Jason Martin**  
**August 2007**  
**Studio**

UK: If you would be asked to do a portrait of the queen, how would you do that?

JM: (laughs) well I have made a painting called 'Queenie', not quite a portrait though...

UK: You are an abstract painter and that's my reason for asking this question. I think that nothing in these days – certainly since about the 60ies – is artistically as difficult as being a non-figurative painter. Because... isn't already everything said about abstract painting? Thus, what I really want to know is how you got involved and so interested in painting non-figuratively?

JM: The first and most important experience I had which consolidated my interest in abstraction as opposed to figuration was a visit to Waddingtons Gallery London. I was still at school in 1987 and I saw a Franz Kline painting. I had never seen these paintings before other than in reproduction. I realised there and then that my own interests were common to the merits of this work. The painting was immediate, dramatic, full of life yet so economical and direct. Opposite Franz Kline there was a Julian Schnabel. And the Julian Schnabel was a very simple painting on velvet. Maybe three components making this work. There was this biomorphic form, a splash and a scrape. And that was it. For me it seemed to harness the fundamentals of what painting could be without misleading you through figuration. The content seemed to be all there. It wasn't less real than any figurative painting I had seen. If anything it was more so, more immediate, more arresting. The Kline and the Schnabel were positively charged and more emotionally engaging than any figuration I had encountered. I realized that my belief lay in what I then thought was called non-objective painting. So I thought that I could deal with the issues of painting through abstraction in much more challenging ways – I thought figuration was a means of getting somewhere but if I could do away with that I could have a much cleaner understanding of painting or approach to making painting – a cleaner approach to my practice. However, at the same time there has always been an element of figuration in what I do. The most exciting abstraction distils figuration. I think it is necessary to understand the fundamentals of painting as necessarily embracing or encompassing figuration and abstraction. That day when I saw the Julian Schnabel, I recognized the

challenge to achieve a balance between the two. When he is on a good day ,lucky I caught him on a good day, he can actually achieve a balance between figuration and abstraction or an interior space and a depicted space, a picture and a stage. With regard to my own works, I think that they are to be considered as bodies in themselves. My paintings have an interior life, which I like to trap and keep at the very moment they start working in the studio. That interior life gives them a sense of a body, makes them physical, less abstract and neutral.

UK: Do you have a plan before you start to put the paint on the surface? Do you already have an idea what colour to choose?

JM: Yes – I make choices with volumetric colour in mind. Prior to any fabrication of panels, I make decisions about support and scale. I choose to work with colour for its structural and not its decorative quality, how a certain colour actually feels between ones fingers, as opposed to its clarity of hue. Many of my works appear monochromatic, however that is mostly not correct.

UK: It is interesting to talk about monochrome painting with regard to your works, because indeed, they are not monochromatic in the traditional sense.

JM: No, not at all. I try to fuse the warmth of figuration with the academic rigour of abstraction. I like to think that the spaces I reach with my work subvert traditional ideas of monochrome painting.

UK: Yes, I absolutely see your point. As we are talking about figuration and abstraction and the role of colour, there is a nice anecdote that comes to my mind, which occurred recently in our museum. Some months ago a new invigilator started to work with us. A woman. It's the first time that she works in a museum and she isn't very familiar with art. She was working in a room that included a work by Stella from 1964 with blue and yellow stripes. The title is "Rabat". I asked the woman whether she likes the work. And she said: "No, not at all. I have some works at home but very different ones. I don't like this kind of abstract art." As I knew that she is from Morocco and born in Rabat, I replied: "Look at the title!", and went away. Two or three days later I met her again and asked what she was thinking now? "Oh", she said, "now I can imagine what idea stands behind the picture. These are the colours of Rabat." You see, that's excellent, it's great! Sometimes it's easy to make people familiar with what is going on in art, equally in abstract art.

But talking about the relationship between abstraction and figuration – or depiction – the role of the title seems relevant. For most of your works you use titles. Do you have already a theme or even the title in mind, when you start painting?

JM: No, I always wait until the meaning of the work reveals itself through its making. Until I have made an emotional journey. This may be a very quick and intense journey, or it may be a long journey, which may take many, many hours. I always say to people that it takes a lot of hard work to make things look easy and good results should look effortless. The eye always finds flaws first. Painting should seem to be uncomplicated though it is far from that. A title is a means of closing off and endorsing the completion of a work. How this is arrived at must be poetic, never literal and only very occasionally descriptive.

UK: When I went through one of your catalogues, I came across one painting being entitled “Atheist”. I thought: My Goodness. How can you title an abstract work “Atheist”? What was the journey through this particular painting? How did it start and how did you come to the conclusion: “Now I will give this work the title »Atheist«”?

JM: Form, colour, composition are all tools that develop thought and idea. They suggest certain notions that you arrive at unexpectedly through the painting activity. “Atheist” at the end, looked so resolved and felt so concrete, yet remained an enigma to me as it seemed to have had the spiritual life sucked from it. That gave the work a strength that was uncompromising and unforgiving, it could compete with any of the most spiritual or pseudo-spiritual statements that I had made previously. For me it was a kind of an anti-painting or an anti-spiritual work.

UK: So the process of doing a painting means that you enter into a very strong relationship with that work?

JM: Yes – and the title has to be suggestive. It has to convey somehow a poetic suggestion of what the painting is. Where is the poetic storyline of the painting? What character and personality does a work have? The works in this publication all relate in some way to themes found in Western religious narratives, Eastern ritual and calligraphy. The symbolism and references found in religious painting for centuries have engaged with still life and landscape. I want to extend the possible frame of reference beyond the figure and the many interpretations of Jesus on the cross. I think the mystery of painting allows you to consider different and diverse conditions, memories, emotions in an endless flow, just by the

very nature of how you push paint around on a surface. You may have preconceptions of what you want the painting to do. More than likely though, it will take you somewhere very different. You have to learn to temper deliberation with abandon.

It might well be that the support that I had from the church in Gütersloh, for which I will make a new painting, is because they could see that the proposed work is a thing in itself, it's a body in itself, not a depiction. Equally, it is not the outcome of an increasing abstraction. It takes the opposite direction, starting from abstraction and becoming physical through abstraction. A body in itself, a statement of its own, existing in its own right.

UK: In the same catalogue, in which I came across "Atheist", there is another work: "Praying to Mecca". It is yellow and I really think it has to be yellow. The colour that comes to my mind when I think about Arabia is always yellow. It's not black only because that's the colour of the Kaaba. For me, the representative colour is much rather yellow. It is, I find, a very optimistic painting.

JM: Yes, I made this work in 2000 and showed it in the USA. With "Praying to Mecca", I had a sense that the work possessed an absolute and very specific directional geometry. The drawn elements that underpin the composition and the flat colour, yellow, being not so spatial, make the painting almost a sign or gate or even a threshold.

UK: I find your occupation with religious themes really very interesting. What does it mean to believe in God? To believe in God means that you have an extremely high knowledge of abstract thinking, doesn't it? I don't know – it's a question.

JM: God is a positive way of giving an identity to what we don't know. I do not trust the common idea of God, this all benevolent and omnipotent being or entity. My idea of God relates more to nature and the sublime.

However, I consider myself to be as spiritual as any religious man I have met. My faith, which I am sure is common to the 'believer', comes first from myself. Having a faith in the possibilities of what, or who you are, defines a person. I reach my own resolve not through certainty, more from the solitary enterprise of building a studio practice each day, burning a slow flame of personal vision and a lasting commitment, perhaps like ploughing a very large field. I think people do find their own interpretation of God. So the titling of this publication and of the exhibition in Gütersloh is important, there are many Gods. The reading of Gods is deliberately not singular.

UK: So, how is the title now finally? With the plural?

JM: Yes, with the plural, "For Gods Sake"! Because, HOW you read these words reveals your own position: Is it an expletive, is it a blaspheme, is it an answer to a question or is it just a very straight matter of fact?

UK: Let's talk a little further about this current project and notably about the mentioned work for the church.

JM: Yes, the painting for the church will have the form or geometry of a curved diamond. I had previously made two works which were inspired by the German romanticist painter Franz Pforr and his work 'Sulamith and Maria' 1811, The paintings I titled "Pieta" and "Peak" went to Brazil and Lebanon respectively. Beirut, as you know, was heavily destroyed last year and reduced to rubble. I was very happy with 'PEAK' going there. Having these works going to predominantly Muslim and Catholic countries, made me realise that they can mean something very different in their spiritual capacity to different individuals who now live with and experience those works. For Islam and Christianity, the arch resonates very different architectural significance.

Starting from there, I came to think about how I could adapt the cross to resemble a curved diamond and vice-versa. I looked at common architectural details in Islamic architecture, hence the curved diamond, but I also wanted to make quintessentially a cross. The idea of employing these different forms became very interesting to me. Abstraction has the possibility to be symbolic and iconic for a Muslim or Christian, man or woman. Two communities of people that go into a house of worship, whether it be a mosque or a church, and they draw their own meaning from a painting that shares opposing or different spiritual identities .

UK: Yes, it's an interesting thought. Here, you're talking about two different sacred spaces. Both of them stand in a great contrast to a white cube or museum space. But all of them possess an aura of their own and it's this aura, which makes people keep a distance to the work. This isn't necessarily something positive. I rather consider it important to draw the audience close to a work. As I heard a while ago, Barnett Newman really wanted the audience to come as close as possible to his paintings, he really liked that. Of course, you won't get the same emotions from two metres distance than from being very close but generally the viewer is kept in a distance. A Newman, or let's say not all Newmans but the Newman works better from close distance. With your work it's quite different. Your paintings work in a very different way from the far distance – but they work. However, when I

entered your studio some minutes ago, I felt it as important to get very close to the works. One becomes very interested in the surface. I wanted to see it from all directions and I want to see how the light breaks with the structure of the painting and then finally I would love to go over it with the hand, which is emotional, and want to complete the senses by touching.

JM: Yes, until you touch you haven't completed the senses. For me, when I see an ancient ornament I want to touch it. But you are worried that by doing so you might damage it somehow. The paintings that I make are tactile because I like to think that they might engage you not unlike a three dimensional sculpture engages your space. They are not flat, rather they ask to be understood from different positions. I like to think that my paintings can be experienced quite like sculpture; you are always finding differences by moving around, there is no fixed position that is more important than another. Surface helps you develop form.

UK: We spoke about what both a sacred space and the museum space share, which is a means to keep people in a distance through some attitude of reverence. But obviously, the kind of aura that both spaces possess, is considerably different. And it's the context that is equally crucial for the reception of your work.

JM: Totally. If I make the painting for the church in Gütersloh succeed as I would like in the studio, I have to imagine how that work might inhabit the space of the church. And it will be a very interesting prospect. How that painting answers the space and how it holds up in the space if it carries the aura that it should, this will be for me a very revealing exercise. Talking about context as well as of the notion of distance or closeness, makes me remember an extraordinary experience I once had. I witnessed the destruction of an incredible work, ironically named "Cathedra" by Barnett Newman. Shown in the Steijdelik Museum in Amsterdam, this painting was slashed four times along the centre. Coincidentally, I happened to be the last to see "Cathedra" live and the first to see it dead. I saw the guts of the painting hanging from the main canvas. Immediately after the attack, I confronted the man, who did it, asking him what gave him the right to deny me the experience of seeing that work. He replied: "There is a problem between realism and abstraction". I wonder if he would have gone to the trouble if the work was not in a museum, perhaps in a church. In that case, it would not have been subjected to the same intellectual criteria that are connected to a museum or a gallery. This is what I find exiting and challenging in conceiving a painting for a church.