



Q&A with Daniel Rich

By Joseph R. Wolin

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Joseph R. Wolin: You have always painted the built environment of the fairly recent past, not only Modernist buildings—both stylish and vernacular—but also utilitarian structures like natural gas storage towers, ski jumps, or hunting blinds. Lately, you seem to be choosing very specific sites, such as a lone mosque standing in the wake of the tsunami's destruction, a bombed-out building in the Gaza strip, or the façade of a legislative office in Ramallah. Is there a particular political program at work here? And how do you conceive of the relationship between Modernism and current events?

Daniel Rich: I am trying not to put too much of my own political agenda into the work, even though I realize that is pretty much impossible to avoid. My selection of imagery to paint from underwent a change over the past year or so. I used to go and just search through books or magazines for reference material, whereas now I let the subjects come my way. I listen to the news and try to read the newspaper, either online or in physical form. Some of my favorite images have been on the covers of *The New York Times* (the Palestinian Legislative Council, for example), *The Financial Times* (the tsunami image), or other publications. When a particular event happens and I hear about it, I'll look it up online and do an image search, or I end up following a trail some other place that still relates to the event. The title for my show, *Black Sunday*, for example, references a certain event that is known in the military in Iraq to be the "beginning" of the insurgency there.

So Modernism and the imagery I used to go after have pretty much fallen by the wayside, even though such buildings might still appear in my work. I now approach my paintings more as landscapes tied to historical events. I used to isolate the buildings in color fields, whereas now I paint as much as I can. Lately, I have been searching soldiers' blogs online, where there is a wealth of imagery to be found. That's where I found the image of Baghdad that I am painting for an exhibition at Mario Diacono Gallery in Boston. I have had some correspondence with soldiers about their pictures, and I like that connection and source for the imagery. I'd like to follow further along those lines because it's a lot more direct; I would really like to go to Iraq to take my own pictures, as I know so many of the sites now from looking and reading about them on the Internet, but that's a different story.

Joseph R. Wolin: How does technique figure into your program? You've developed a method of painting that involves transposing your photographic sources into panels that feature intricate compositions of delimited areas of flat, usually uninflected color. And you paint with enamel, using an elaborate system of masking. How do you make the painterly decisions that allow you to simplify and schematize the image in this way? What meaning does this method of working have for you, particularly in relation to your charged subjects?

Daniel Rich: It has become rather clear to me why I make paintings by masking, graphically translating imagery, and choosing enamel and house paint as medium. Skateboarding is connected to architecture, relies on it, as does graffiti. A major part of both skateboarding and graffiti is constantly looking at the buildings and spaces around you—searching for a good spot. Both are pretty "hard-edged" in their act, design, colors, etc. I think that is my root attraction to the built environment. Also, growing up in Germany, buildings made a significant impact on my perception of the landscape—the "incorporation" or intrusion of new architecture amongst the old and buildings as signifiers for historical events.

When I went to art school, I thought I'd do graphic design, and I ended up doing lots of screen printing on panel and incorporating painting into that. Screen printing involves planning, color mixing, masking, squeegeeing, graphic translation using photocopies and photographs: all the aspects I now utilize in my process.

In graduate school, I began making these geometric abstractions that were aerial shots of places like the runway that Air Force One is parked on, a nuclear waste dump—all somehow connected to contemporary politics, or things I saw or heard about. This all became heavily impacted by the events of 9/11, the war in Afghanistan, the build-up to the war in Iraq. That was when I became a lot more conscious of the news. At some point, I thought I had run the geometric thing into the ground. Why not try to actually paint the building/space, instead of relying on this aerial abstraction idea? At the time I decided to move on, I copied the Ronald Reagan Airport schematic out of this in-flight magazine. I used the techniques I had learned from screen printing and applied them to painting. My process and technique have grown from that first attempt. It's the only way I knew how to paint a picture of something: graphically utilizing the program of stenciling.

I am constantly trying to push what to paint and how to paint it. It can be really frustrating and tedious sometimes, but when it's done I find it's what I'm after. I like the continuum from my early artistic influences to my current work, and it's become rather important to me. Painting graphically is almost a default. There is no doubt that the visual languages of skateboarding and graffiti subcultures, as well as the graphic qualities of the media, have heavily influenced my work.

Daniel Rich's solo show *Black Sunday* is on display at SUNDAY in the Lower East Side between the dates of May 18, 2007 – June 17, 2007.

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