ROB REYNOLDS

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# OVERVIEW

ANTHONY MEIER FINE ARTS

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*Earthrise 3*, 2020, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 24 ¾ × 18 ¾ inches (62.9 × 47.6 cm)

# A CONVERSATION WITH ROB REYNOLDS AND EMMA CLINE

**EMMA** So, let's talk about the title of the show *Overview*.

**ROB** The show is a small survey of the categories of painting I have been doing during the past ten years or so, much of it circling around an interest in ecology, landscape, the environment and perception — hence the Earthrise image. And *Overview* is also a reference to a feeling some astronauts report when they see the earth from space for the first time.

**EMMA** What happens?

**ROB** It's been called the *overview effect*, and sounds like an explosion of awareness. The astronauts might blast off as patriotic Americans of whatever faith, but when they see the fragile, pale blue world in a limitless universe, they are instantly overcome with an awesome sense of wonder, feeling of unity with nature, universal kinship with other human beings and the earth as a whole. A psychologist described it as a state of *interconnected euphoria*.

**EMMA** I've never wanted to go to space before, but as you were talking, I suddenly do! What I see in your work is an attempt to make these inconceivable concepts of scope and time and environment somehow perceivable. And it's very interesting to me how you approach this: your paintings raise questions about how to make these unimaginable concepts somehow legible.

**ROB** Sometimes the strategy is as simple as taking an image out of context. The *Earthrise* painting is based on the photo taken by NASA astronaut William Anders during the Apollo 8 mission in 1968 as they were heading back to earth from the moon. It is one of the most popular

photos ever, which makes it a challenge to paint, and I'm interested in it as a historical artifact, curious about the way it initially gave people, especially ecologists, such an overwhelming sense of possibility; how technology has a way of transforming the human. While we can imagine how mind blowing it was to see it in 1968, we just sort of take the image for granted now. I think about it basically as a landscape painting with a nod to Ad Reinhardt. For some reason I felt like painting it again and again at the beginning of the global pandemic — with its own eco lessons.

**EMMA** As a contrast, this makes me curious about the Magnolia painting, which is earthy in its own way.

**ROB** Yes, and I see it as totally related — another form of landscape. It's in a series of botanicals I have been making, and like Earthrise, it is oil paint on canvas, made in relation to a found photograph, in this case the tangled limbs of a magnolia tree on the south lawn of the White House. President Obama gave a seedling from it to the people of Cuba; it was on the US $20 bill; FDR and Churchill sat under it. Andrew Jackson planted it in memory of his wife who died during his savage presidential campaign, and so on. I think of it as a kind of witness tree, or to make a literary reference, like the trees in Richard Powers' *Overstory* — a book that points to the idea of non-human agency. As for the Jackson magnolia, it was cut down about a year into the Trump presidency.

**EMMA** And the words *Magnolia grandiflora* tell it like it is. Will you talk about the text and typography in your work?

**ROB** I've always just liked the play of words and images. Sometimes the text has a direct relationship and points to a book or a place that it's lifted from or refers to. Sometimes it's deeper, or oblique and spontaneous. In some cases it's edited, and sometimes it's made up. I think I could have been very happy as a sign painter.

**EMMA** You're drawn to text's visual form?

**ROB** Yes, ever since I started painting. With text there's something about the shape, it's fun to paint, and it gives the painting a voice. There can be something deadpan about the right word in the right typeface. I just like the way that it opens up meaning, or helps situate the image, amplifies the flatness of the painting surface, or points to layers of information.


*Magnolia*, 2021, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 48 ¾ × 60 ¾ inches (123.8 × 154.3 cm)


*Mount Shasta*, 2021, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 24 ¾ × 30 ¾ inches (62.9 × 78.1 cm)

**EMMA** I think about that a lot with writing. Using words as a tool to mediate and temper the forces that you're trying to work with, especially when you're thinking about something big, which I think you often are. I am curious about the mountain paintings, which I love. They seem to be anchored by text as well.

**ROB** With the Most Painted Mountain series I have been thinking about how we imagine mountains and have painted Everest, the Matterhorn, K2, some amazing peaks in the Andes, one that was the inspiration for the Paramount Pictures mountain. This series is a direct homage to Hokusai both with Mt. Fuji and the digital stencil technique I am using, making them a bit like woodcuts. I'm also referencing Ed Ruscha's work, but moving the conversation to an environmental context. With the mountains, I'm interested in the tendency to read them in terms of the sublime or alpine kitsch on one hand, and the open secret that alpine glaciers around the world supply drinking water for two billion people on the other, not to mention innumerable animals, plants and everything else. I painted a new one of Mount Shasta for this project.

**EMMA** I remember spending part of a summer around Shasta Lake, and how ever present the mountain was in the corner of your eye, and sort of unlikely, rising up from the horizon. What I vaguely remember about Mount Shasta is that it's supposed to be a *power center*, like Mt. Fuji, and there was a harmonic convergence in the late 80's where people were supposed to gather and meditate for peace. Did they actually do it?

**ROB** Yes. I clearly recall some hippie friends of mine from college driving cross country for it, but given all that's happened since, it's unclear what impact it had. Just the same, Shasta has a special charisma. It's a real California mountain, named for the Shasta people of the Klamath mountains who live there. John Muir wrote a famous zone by zone description of its ecology, only to have a fitting near death experience in a snowsquall. It's a crucible for water rights in the American West as its glaciers disappear. It's still a New Age mecca, and I like your Mt. Fuji reference: it's another volcanic beauty, a great source of life.

**EMMA** I'm curious, because even though you've been in California for many years, you draw a direct connection from your work to growing up on the East coast. As you were talking, I was thinking of East coast painting traditions—the Hudson River school, the American version of the Romantic sublime and landscape painting. I'm wondering how you see this element showing up in your work, because in so many other ways, the work feels very California.

**ROB** Living here has been a big change for me, and I definitely have many enduring interests from my east coast days that are, by contrast, great to think about in the estranged context of California. I started painting shipwrecks back in Brooklyn, but really made most of them when I got to L.A. With respect to painting, I've always been a fan of the art that emerged here: light and space, and the continuum of that whole early Cal Arts post-studio crowd who hatched here.

**EMMA** And who are you thinking of?

**ROB** I connect with and reference several traditions of painting, but the artist I am thinking about most lately is Jack Goldstein. When I was in college, I studied with one of his former assistants who painted some of his pictures, the artist and philosopher Tom Zummer. He had some crazy stories and a helpful way of framing the work, but also a direct view into its technical side, how it was made, its relationship to cinema and so forth.

**EMMA** I'm always interested in the place where the film set stops and the world begins.

**ROB** I feel that in Goldstein's work.

**EMMA** So you responded to that post-studio approach?

**ROB** Yes. I just feel like the idea comes first, even if it changes in execution, and it most often does. And not being tethered to one medium can be a helpful shift of perspective even if you spend most of your time doing one thing; I talk about this with my students a lot. I am always working steadily on sculpture, sound, video, and I'm collaborating with an earth scientist studying icebergs. Painting is a meticulous process for me, and lately it has been very consuming. An upside has been that the solitary nature of my painting process is well suited to the pandemic.

But back to your question, what I really respond to in Goldstein's work are his image choices, and their cool relationship to color field painting, and how the work goes with and against the grain of Pop art. That said, an important distinction is that while Goldstein said he was interested in making paintings perfectly smooth and *without incident*, I am interested in the opposite: incident itself, the hand, even accidents. Another difference is that aside from some digital wizardry, I do most of the work myself. But to be clear, my work is never photorealist per se, and I'm still enthralled with paint, and have been since before I could drive a car.

*Magic Hour*, 2018, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 16 ¾ × 12 ¾ inches (42.5 × 32.4 cm)

*Sun 1*, 2018, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas, 80 × 100 inches (203.2 × 254 cm)

**EMMA** You've been an artist since you were a kid?

**ROB** Yes. I've always loved to draw, paint and make things. My mother is an artist and was very encouraging. And I had a great art teacher who helped me understand that making art all the time is a great way of being in the world – and not necessarily an obvious career where I grew up.

**EMMA** Maybe more so than on the East coast, there's something hyper accelerated about Los Angeles. I think this is where you'll start, or have already started, to see climate change affecting us more obviously; the networks of interdependence are slightly more visible here and will be tested sooner. That seems to be an interest of yours, illuminating in your artwork these sometimes invisible matrixes that connect humans and the environment.

**ROB** That's definitely interesting to me. In the East, we might notice an uncanny warm day in the dead of winter, or realize that winter is shorter, but in L.A., which is basically built on a semi-desert, it feels like the weather is indexed on everything in a much more obvious way. And with all the traffic and smog, cause and effect are out in the open, especially when we are in drought and fires are burning. I'd also say that dramatic visual indexing on the landscape is also true of the Arctic in its own way too.

**EMMA** Totally. All these systems we build up to tell ourselves that our future is not uncertain are on display in Los Angeles and help us pretend that it's a sustainable project to live this way. For this reason, your suns are beautiful and magnetic, but at the same time, there's something unsettling about them.

**ROB** The sun will do that. The paintings are an homage to California, are an overt reference to light and space artists, abstract color field painting, the movies; the sky and air itself. Even while we are living in divisive times, it is something that everyone on earth relates to in one way or another. How long have you been in Los Angeles for?

**EMMA** Three years.

**ROB** You're still in the honeymoon period! When I first arrived from New York the sun started as my hero and over time became a brutal antagonist, especially when we were in the worst part of the drought. But to be clear, the sun paintings are the least photographic of the paintings I make: they are also just circles in rectangles, and from the painter's point of view, I have the same question that has been batted around since the beginning: how am I going to make the painting feel blindingly bright?

*Iceberg #1 (Disko Bay, 69.2667° N, 52.0447 7° W Greenland, 22 July 2019, 9:15 PM*), 2021, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 24 ¾ × 30 ¾ × 2 inches (62.9 × 78.1 × 5.1 cm)

*Iceberg #2 (Sermeq Kujalleq 69.1667° N, 49.9167° W Greenland, 21 July, 2019, 5:00 AM)*, 2021, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 24 × 30 inches (61 × 76.2 cm)

**EMMA** That makes me think of the Paul Virillio quote: “Machines for seeing modify perception.” Which I return to a lot with your work, like you are often creating these tools to shift perception. I wonder about that as an aim, to reframe or refocus or recalibrate.

**ROB** I love that. I hope that the paintings in this show can point to and participate in a conversation about how we see nature. I think about what painting does that’s special in a time of so much interaction with digital interfaces, VR, AR, video games, screens everywhere. Paintings are slow, and in my favorite cases, basically handmade.

**EMMA** And in terms of the many layers of meaning: I’m thinking of your iceberg paintings. At first glance, they almost look like stock photos, like what you would get when you Google *iceberg*, but then you revealed where the image came from, which was it was painted from a still frame of a video that you shot in Greenland reenacting a scene from *Apocalypse Now*. I just want to hear you talk about that because it’s so fun and fascinating to me.

**ROB** The iceberg paintings are based on work I did in Greenland during the summer of 2019, which as it turned out was the most extreme period of glacial melt in recorded history. And it’s sort of a long story, but yes, one project there was restaging a sequence from Apocalypse Now in the Arctic among massive calving icebergs. Working with a dear friend who is a cinematographer, we shot for days on a small boat in midnight sun, very close to giant icebergs, filming the contours of the icefjord where they calve and go to sea. We recorded the sound of the Greenland ice sheet melting, recasting Martin Sheen’s Captain Willard with a Greenlandic boat driver, with the intention of recentering that story of off-the-rails colonial conquest with a local perspective on how the rhythms of life are being disrupted by human caused climate change.

**EMMA** So the paintings are film stills?

**ROB** Yes, they are all based on this footage and hundreds of still photos I made. I archived all the date, time, GPS metadata for each iceberg image, but that info is just sort of baked in to the painting, not out front. I am referencing many artists who have painted images of the arctic, but I think of icebergs as a perfect readymade for the 21st century. They are different from every angle, constantly changing, and disappearing before our eyes. My question is: how are the feelings of awe and wonder commonly associated with the experience of nature altered by the awareness of human-caused climate change?


*Painted Ship, Painted Sea (Panther)*, 2019, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 24 ¾ × 30 ¾ × 2 inches (62.9 × 78.1 × 5.1 cm)

While this might evoke *apocalyptic* feelings, I see all of my work as hopeful and not nihilistic. A real sense of possibility was offered by my friend Claus, the Greenlandic boat driver I mentioned. In Inuit dialects, the word for *weather* is the same word for knowledge, intelligence and even spirit: *sila.* When the weather and environment is a constant matter of life and death, it effectively collapses the distinct categories of the human and nature. When you think about it enough to feel it, it's a bit like the *overview effect* might feel, but you only have to go outside. Or better yet, go to Greenland. I learned a lot from Claus about how our consumption directly effects their local ecosystem.

**EMMA** That backstory about the iceberg, for example, or your paintings that have text underneath — these are things that formally change my perception of the image. I'm interested in the ways that you're always deftly undercutting the familiarity of an image or our instinctive response to an image, resisting the neatness.

**ROB** Hopefully the work reflects the radical uncertainty and discernible but entangled nature of things. I am wondering how we feel and then react to the notion that humankind is a geological force, the way that the problematic idea of the Anthropocene provokes us to do. A recurrent issue in the land of sunshine.

**EMMA** There is a similarity, in a technical and visual way, to how the Magnolia and the mountain tops and the icebergs, skies and earths are painted –even though they are such different subjects at such different scales. Is there an approach that you think unites these works?

**ROB** The hope is that when you're 20 paces away, the image is coherent and hangs together in a unified way, and might make you think about seeing an image in a photo, on the Internet, or on a screen. As you get closer, you're faced with just the pure materiality: the ugliness of the paint on a support in some cases, lusciousness in others, but ultimately something that was made by a searching human hand.

**Emma Cline** is the author of the novel *The Girls*, and the short story collection *Daddy*. Her stories have been published in *The New Yorker, Granta,* and *The Paris Review.* She received the Plimpton Prize from *The Paris Review* and was chosen as one of *Granta's* best Young American Novelists. She is from Northern California.

**Rob Reynolds** is a Los Angeles based artist.

*The Great Comet Neowise Over California in 2020*, 2021, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 16 ¾ × 12 ¾ inches (42.5 × 32.4 cm)

*Moon and Jupiter*, 2018, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 16 ¾ × 12 ¾ inches (42.5 × 32.4 cm)

# SEEING NATURE (AFTER THE HUMAN)
## ON PAINTING AS PHILOSOPHY

I vividly remember my first visit to Rob Reynolds' studio.

There were the, almost disturbing, brown-blue tones of glacial runoff and pooling produced by the melting ice of a South American alpine glacier; the shades of blue that give his paintings of floating icebergs and shipwrecks, stuck in and overgrown by ice, an unusual vivacity.

I found myself gripped by the aesthetic appeal of Reynolds' depictions of nature, and struck by the feeling that what I was looking at were philosophical investigations carried out in the genre of painting.

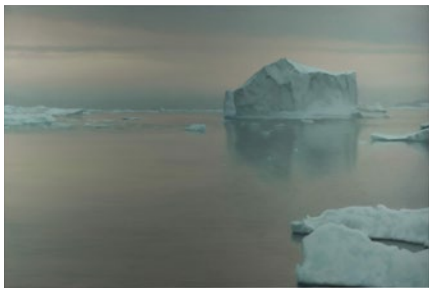
Reynolds' icebergs, glaciers, shipwrecks, botanicals and suns are contemporary studies of seeing, of how we have come to see — and experience — nature. What is more, they are explorations of how to see differently, of how to constitute oneself through the act of seeing.

While his current practice includes sculpture, video, digital work, and collaboration with earth scientists, Reynolds' paintings transfer us out of a human-centric way of looking at the world and into an Earth-centric experience of being part of a planetary system.

The paintings no longer tell the story of sublime nature, of humans that escaped a heroic yet terrifying state of origin. Instead, they make visible the deep history of Earth. Their colors shapes and conceptual re-framings tell of the biosphere, of how its chemical composition changed over eons. The depth of time that reverberates through meticulous brushwork in his paintings renders ridiculous 18th century ideas in which only humans have histories, while nature goes on in endless seasonal circles.

His icebergs calve because of rising temperatures, they float in a sea heated by greenhouse gases, discharging fresh water into the sea, where it has the tendency to sink and disrupt marine ecologies and currents that are highly sensitive to changes in temperature and salinity.

In fact, what is discharged from Reynolds' icebergs — from his paintings based on his recent Arctic fieldwork — is a story of Earth that is neither for humans nor about humans; it is a story that brings humans into view as a late-stage episode in planetary history, written in the language of geochemistry. Indeed, if one gets close enough, one can see, and feel, how his icebergs enroll humans in a story of Earth that exceeds them by billions of years, bringing human action into view in the language of geochemistry, as if they were saying, 'No, there is nothing special about you.'



*Earthrise*, taken on December 24, 1968, by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders
Gerhard Richter, *Iceberg*, 1982, oil paint on canvas, 40 × 60 inches, (101 × 151 cm)

In *Earthrise* (2021), the artist commits a section of a photo of Earth taken in 1968 from lunar orbit to paint on canvas. The photo that the painting was based on was taken by astronaut William Anders more than half a century ago and shows the arctic to be covered in a thick shield of ice, brought back for us to reckon with anew, Reynolds' version speaks to the present. Might it reveal that the ice has receded, and much of the once-white space has given way to a new chilling bright blue?

Reynolds' disposition is distinct from the approach of Gerhard Richter who has taken on similar subject matter. Unlike Richter, for Reynolds, estrangement is not an end but a means, serving as a disruption to our current mode of seeing, a release of the natural world from the modern conception of the human and nature as separate or oppositional. Richter's blurred version of nature, despite its inherent mediation through the photographic apparatus, is still indebted to the more Romantic Arctic conceptions of Casper David Friedrich, and later Fredric Church, for whom the beautiful and terrifying, the Other of the human, are fundamental to a conception of selfhood. Insofar as they break precisely with the concept of nature that organized the ruins of Friedrich and Church, Reynolds' paintings do not show the fragility of civilization and the human in the face of a terrifying nature. What capsizes in his shipwrecks, for instance, is not so much the ship but the conceptual grid — the choreography of seeing — of modernity.

The effect of Reynolds' paintings is that both humans and nature cease to exist — cease to exist as being the seeing thing, cease to exist as indexes of a sublime nature and what emerges is a new kind of beauty. Instead both humans and nature become something else, something still tentative, explorative, experimental: they become planetary.

**Tobias Rees** is the founding Director of The Berggruen Institute's Transformations of the Human Program. Working in the intersection of anthropology, art history, the history of science, and the philosophy of modernity, he also serves as Reid Hoffman Professor of Humanities at the New School for Social Research and is a Fellow of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.


*Northwest Passage (HMS Terror)*, 2017, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 12 ¾ × 16 ¾ inches (32.4 × 42.5 cm)


*Panther Stuck in Ice*, 2017, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 12 ¾ × 16 ¾ inches (32.4 × 42.5 cm)

*ONE*, 2020, oil, alkyd and acrylic polymer paint on canvas in welded aluminum artist's frame, 48 ¾ × 30 × 2 inches (123.8 × 76.2 × 5.1 cm)

ROB REYNOLDS (b. 1966) lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. Reynolds received a Bachelor of Arts from Brown University in Art and Semiotics in 1990 and continued his studies at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1992.

Reynolds has had solo exhibitions at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA; LAXART, Los Angeles, CA; Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, CA; David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, RI; Landau Gallery, Belmont, MA; NYEHAUS, New York, NY; Ochi Gallery, Ketchum, ID; Buzzer30, Queens, New York; and ROVE/Kenny Schachter Contemporary, New York.

Recent group exhibitions and projects include *Emergency on Planet Earth: In a Time Close to Now*, UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, CA, 2020; *Friends and Family*, Peter Mendenhall Gallery, Pasadena, CA, 2019; City of West Hollywood Art on the Outside Billboard Projects, 2019; *Bright | Shiny*, Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA, 2019; *DOES IT MAKE A SOUND*, Ochi Projects, Los Angeles, CA, 2018; *An Ocean View for Denver*, The Art Hotel, Denver, CO, 2018; *Weird Rain*, The Garden, Los Angeles, CA, 2017; *The Mini Show*, The Lodge, Los Angeles, CA, 2015; *6H to 8B*, Fellows of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, 2015; *Blessed Oblivion*, Gavlak, Palm Beach, CA, 2014; *Brown University 250th Anniversary Exhibition Part 2: Sarah Morris, Rob Reynolds, Taryn Simon*, David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, RI, 2014; *Common Tread: Traversing the American Landscape*, William D. Cannon Art Gallery, Carlsbad, CA, 2014; *Incognito*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA. 2014; *Sea Stories Between the Tides*, Highlight Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 2013; *Funhouse, TRUTH & BEAUTY*, Los Angeles, CA, 2013; *Incognito*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA, 2013; *Summer Show*, Nye+Brown, Los Angeles, CA, 2012; *Artist's Tower of Protest: Mark di Suvero and others*, Pacific Standard Time at the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA, 2012; *Incognito*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA, 2012; *The Lords & The New Creatures*, Nye+Brown, Los Angeles, CA, 2011; *Alptraum!*, Cell, London, UK; *Transformer*, Washington, D.C.; *Deutscher Kunstlerbund*, Berlin, Germany; *The Company*, Los Angeles, CA, 2011; *Art/Music Alchemy*, Starkwhite, Auckland, NZ, 2011; *Social Photography*, Carriage Trade, New York, NY, 2011; *So Much Depends*, Royale Projects, Indian Wells, CA, 2011; and *Meet Me Inside*, Gagosian, Los Angeles, CA, 2010.

Reynolds' work is in the public collections of LACMA, The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, The R.I.S.D. Museum, Brown University and numerous private collections.


Courtesy of the artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco
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