

This interview with independent curator Carole Ann Klonarides and Thomas Kovachevich took place on May 11, 2007. It commemorates the opening of his exhibition of recent paintings at Kim Light/ LightBox on Saturday, May 19, 2007.



Thomas Kovachevich, *The Kiss*, 2007, Acrylic on linen, 60" x 40"

CA: You've worked in all different media – but now it seems like you're really into painting, maybe you can talk about the new work at Kim Light/Lightbox.

TK: I was inspired to do these paintings by observing earlier works of mine and deciding to use them as my models. I have painted throughout my life and the subject of the paintings has always been my previous work. It has been a way for me to re-look at things that interest me from another point of view.

CA: Are these new paintings of found or discarded objects?

TK: Yes, They are pieces of plastic that are used for product display – so called blister wraps or blister packaging found on every conceivable item that's sold, and they're made of clear plastic. Plastic is attractive to me; it's just a seductive material. Partly because it can take on any form and it's seamless and that continuity has an appeal. Acrylic paint is plastic, too, so if I'm applying plastic to more plastic, they end up making another plastic object.

They're objects,. I'm calling them paintings, like a lot of other work I do, but they're really hybrids. Likewise the paintings on these blister wraps I'm calling them paintings but they're in fact sculptural objects that have paint on them, and it gets confusing especially on the abstract ones - like what is top, bottom, inside, outside, left, right...and once again that ambiguity has its appeal. It further triggered a question of mine, which is a persistent one - why are things shaped the way they are shaped? What is the meaning of the shape and why are some of us attracted to some shapes and not others and what is it about our neurology that lends itself to some shapes more than other shapes. What's intriguing about it is it also provides a preformed shape and a subject. Once I have chosen a plastic, I paint directly on it.

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LIGHTBOX

A series of the plastics (which were shown at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2002) were then used as a resource for a reexamination of the color and shape on a flat surface, (i.e. a canvas) and by doing this I could change the scale of the early work into something new. I also liked the idea that the paintings would appear abstract and representational at the same time. And how representation and abstraction, like objectivity and subjectivity, can be very confusing.

CA: Maybe you find it challenging to make a painting because your approach is as an improvisational artist. By setting your own boundaries in making a performance or an installation, chance is always involved. Do you feel that making a painting is somewhat performance oriented and that in the process you are opening yourself up to chance?

TK: I think that what you described is close - I don't consider myself exclusively a painter. I begin with an idea and then try to construct it. In fact, I think making a painting, or at least the way I make a painting is the way I am, that they are all reflections of some aspect of my thinking and my personality in which I can see multiple points of view simultaneously.

CA: When you do your performances you made abstract shapes out of pieces of paper and put them adrift on a heated bed of water, where they come "alive." Are you doing the opposite by painting something that's had meaning before and then abstracting it or is it something that has been made useless and nonfunctional and your re-issuing it a function?

TK: I think it can be both things. In these latest paintings, instead of using a palette, separate from the canvas, I place paint directly onto the canvas to use as a palette. This becomes part of the aesthetic of the painting. It's a symbolic representation of what I'm talking about, which is things can be ambiguous and concrete simultaneously. That's how the world seems to me; it's very ambiguous – what is real and what isn't real. That's been a source of intrigue. I'm not sure what the audience sees when they see one of these paintings or any painting. In fact, I think maybe the real creativity in the entire art world is the endless subjectivity about art. I remember a scientist trying to discuss the difference between science and art - art is a search for a subjective truth, which has huge value, and science has the quest for objective truth – I mean there's only one DNA. But an interpretation of an artwork is endless subjective interpretations. And I think that's actually true in science too, until it becomes so clear that it can have an objective truth, but the thing about science is those objective truths are overturned and overturned – maybe it's the same process in art.

CA: You are of a generation of artists who in the late 60's and early 70's explored the idea of demystifying or dematerializing art and making the process become accessible to the viewer. Your work has been compared to other artists of this generation, like Richard Tuttle, who used very simple found materials and then put them together in a way that's sensitive to space and time. Process Art has been criticized as not being art at all but the Emperor's new clothes...

TK: I never worried about that. I recognized early on that it was an open field of enquiry and that you could use any idea and material to do something else with, to transform it or rethink it or look at it in another way. I had a natural inclination for things I could hold in my hand, of a small scale. And I like manipulating things with my hands so it gave me that opportunity as well. Back then I was in Medical School and I used materials that were accessible to me to make art, like surgical tape, gauze, paper or cotton balls, bandages, and tablets and capsules. It gave me an opportunity to come home after 12 hours at the hospital and actually re-engage myself with something conceptual and had nothing to do with

work, as it's just a way to think about things. I love the early constructions I did with gauze and tape and materials like that. And occasionally I still work with these materials.

CA: *When we first met in the mid-1980s I was the Director of a New York Gallery and included your work in an exhibition entitled, Particulars. It was about artists who work in a very enigmatic way, creating their own visual language that is sometimes difficult for the viewer to enter into, but intriguing none-the-less. At the time you were painting or drawing the pieces of paper used in the performances as "characters" and once the viewer witnessed an actual performance live, the paintings took on a new meaning. Like the blister paintings that were exhibited at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, once people discovered what the blisters were, they began conceptualize the origins of the blister and that created a whole different spin on the painting. These paintings really aren't about revealing what the source of the material is; it's more about the shape representing a subject.*

TK: Yes, I think it does because every painting I've ever painted has always been about some other artwork of mine. It's either self-absorption or an opportunity to evaluate something from a different perspective. The first paintings were of works I had done with paper and what I found interesting is that these paintings were actual figurative paintings of these pieces of paper, but appeared to be abstract, not because I abstracted them, but because they actually look like things we call abstract. The most recent paintings are paintings of other paintings that I have previously done and I thought they were good subjects to actually explore.

CA: *Do you think that happenstance plays a big part in your work?*

TK: Idea first, then the execution of the idea. I think one of the things about all of us is that we create a dogma for ourselves in the way we live, definitely the way we make art. And then we actually think we have to follow this dogma that is self-created. I try to deal with happenstance and not be too upset with what occurs. It's been a good lesson because things don't always work out and you can either find the glories in the defects and the struggles or scratch it and start over again. I think that's what we do in our own lives; we either accept disappointments or find something interesting in the disappointment. Or you just put a period to it and say screw that, and go on. I don't know if we talked about the similarities or differences between art and medicine, medicine is not truly a science yet. I mean it is still called "the art of medicine" because it is so subjective. And you can just look at the history of medicine and how things go in and out of fashion, independent of science. And they're overturned over and over again, they're fads. Or even now, the amazing power of advertising over the mind of the doctor is actually scary. The new drugs that come out, no one has any idea if they are any better than the old drugs. Everyone wants the new drug because they're new and therefore, in demand. All these forces are working on the doctor to make that doctor do things that they might not otherwise do for good or bad. What's curious is that it's not that different in the art world. You want to be in the know, you want people to look...if you have a gallery, and you want people to consult you for the hottest artists. If you are doing the artwork and showing it, you're saying you want people to actually look at it and evaluate it and covet it. And so you end up, if you're not careful, doing all kinds of things that you had no intention of doing. It's a fascinating debate to follow a course that you're setting up for yourself but you don't even know what the course is, its shifting all the time.

CA: *You started practicing medicine in Chicago, which has a great arts scene. Once you realized that you were also a practicing artist how did you connect with that art scene?*

TK: Through my friend Tom Shannon, who at the time was an up and coming young artist and whose patron was the late Sam Wagstaff. It was through Tom that I met Sam who was very enthusiastic about the objects I made and took them to New York and showed them around...

CA: *What year was this?*

TK: Late 60's. Sam was the curator of the Art Institute of Detroit at the time – and he took about 30 to 40 of my small sculptures in a ripped and tattered cardboard box that was itself a work of art. Later he embarrassingly admitted that the cleaning people just thought it was garbage and threw it all away which was both kind of weirdly believable but heartbreaking simultaneously. I was completely done in by this. I never really could remake those exact objects. Anyway that's how I got introduced to the art world. I've had such good fortune with such good people being interested over the years. Richard Tuttle did become excited by my work and introduced me to the European curators Harald Szeemann and Jean-Christophe Ammann. They made a pilgrimage to Chicago to see this work and included it in the 1972 Documenta. I think my first show was a group show at the Museum of Modern Art of all things. Pierre Apraxine was the curator and organized a group show at what was then called the Penthouse Gallery in the old Modern. At the time I was like an outsider artist, as I had never heard of Documenta and knew very little about what it all meant. But maybe it was a blessing that I didn't take many of these things very seriously.

CA: *Stephen Prokopoff, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago put your work in a show there, didn't he? Was that your first museum show in Chicago?*

TK: It was. He included me in several shows, including a solo. The first one was called *White on White*, which included artist luminaries like Jasper Johns and Malevich. I was also give a solo show called, *Rooms and Shadows*, which paired my work with the late artist Michael Hurson, who made small rooms made from wood. I applied paint which I matched the color to existing shadows in the museum. And that was really a lot of fun and that's where I met Elenor, my wife. So that was a good thing...

CA: *What piece of yours was in White on White?*

TK: I put pieces of silky looking surgical tape adhered to a piece of Kleenex and they looked great. And there were a couple of pieces made of toilet paper, too. It was fun to take materials like toilet paper and make them so gorgeous that there's no way you'd ever think toilet paper! I rolled one sheet of toilet paper into a cylinder and tied it with white thread.

CA: *How do you put an insurance value on that?!*

TK: Funny, listen to this...I got invited shortly there after to the Paris Biennale, I don't know if there still is one, but there was one then. And so I sent a group of work and I asked about the insurance and they said they only insure the art for the value of the materials – I added it up and it was 37 cents! Come on, its got to be worth more than 37 cents! We never could overcome this obstacle but I sent the stuff anyway.

CA: *There was a book written in 1960 called the Art of Scientific Investigation, by William Ian Beveridge, about how all sorts of scientific research is based on the idea of being open to the possibility of experimentation, as well as discovery and new ideas, which he equates to the art making process. Since the atomic bomb was invented everyone is very aware that science can bring upon our own undoing, which is why I believe artists of your generation made ephemeral art - ending the notion of finding immortality in ones art. And that brings me to the notion of the absurd or the use of humor in art. I think an artist becomes defined by the artists with whom they associate and your artist friends are in this category: Marcus Reitz, an amazing artist form Switzerland who does illustrations that seem almost as if they are going to wash right off the paper, they're so watery and almost invisible. And James Lee Byers who actually makes the invisible his art and Tom Shannon who plays with the wonder of science. And so this is kind of a long-winded way of touching on something that I think is really interesting, how serious is it in being the artist and being the doctor?*

TK: I take both very seriously and have devoted my life to them. Harald Szeemann in '72 classified a group of artists in the Documenta show as "individual mythologists". And this was how he classified me, which I accepted – perhaps the artists I consider peers are also in this category. You used the term 'particular,' which I like.

CA: *Is humor an important part of your art?*

TK: I think the blister paintings can be humorous, I think a lot of them have been humorous or absurd. A friend of mine, the artist Richard Holblock used the word "cheekiness" the other day referring to some work of mine. I think there's a little bit of that in there. A peculiar kind of funny, it's not so much a 'ha-ha' thing but it does have some odd humor. I think that there's a strange contradiction though to back up for a second, to want to do something immortal and then use a piece of Kleenex to do it on...the blister wrap, as you nicely pointed out, is going to last thousands of years I'm told by the ecologists, so all right. I'm conservatorally more sound now than I once was.

CA: *That acrylic paint isn't going to chip off either.*

TK: True. But it is peculiar isn't it that you choose something so delicate that it can barely survive and you invest so much effort and time into it.

CA: *Well there was a time when ephemeral work was greatly embraced and that was the time you got involved in performance art. And there isn't a lot of documentation of what you did then.*

TK: Hardly any documentation. I thought that if there was a camera present it would ruin the experience and I actually still think that. Documentation can get in the way and becomes more important than the actual work. By the way this is true in science as well. An observer changes the experiment simply by being present. Now I wish I had some documentation, but that is nostalgia. To experience the moment was all.

CA: *Isn't medicine kind of dealing with the invisible too?*

TK: It can be, but a rash is seen

CA: *Well let me just stop you here. Within the medical profession would you be the conceptual artist?*

TK: Well what the generalist does in medicine is think. This cognitive ability separates the 'artist' in medicine from the technician.

CA: *You had a wonderful patron in Jay Chiat who collected your work and supported you in your artistic as well as your medical endeavors, he helped underwrite a project you initiated called Doctors by Phone- it was short lived but it was a great idea before computers where one could call up on the phone and get a medical response. But tragically Jay Chiat got gravely ill and he became your patient. What was it like to be both the artist and the doctor?*

TK: I think the way I've been practicing medicine comes closer to the way medicine was historically practiced, whereby if you're a doctor in a small town, you're the doctor to all your friends and acquaintances in the same way that I care for many of my friends and associates. Jay became a collector and a business partner and he became my patient too. And what's that like? I think it's completely appropriate and real – we know each other, I know him, he knows me, and I believe that promotes good medicine. And so it was both very upsetting and very wonderful at the same time to just have the

intimacy. I think that's one of my attractions to both medicine and art. At least the kind of art I want to do, the intimacy of it. I like my performances to be held in an intimate space. And that's what being in the office is like, I'm intimate with one person, with a lot of people all day long but one at a time, and I also feel comfortable with intimacy in my art making practice. At Documenta I made these little objects with, like I mentioned, materials from the hospital or Kleenex, etc. but I put an intimate performance aspect into it too: I had a kind of a tabletop vitreine - it was a table that was sunken that had a glass top on it. And the objects were underneath that glass. Then we took the glass off and people would gather around the table of objects and I would pick up an object and look at it and then I would hand it to a person and they would look at it and then they would hand it back to me and all the other people would watch us do this. Then I would do it with each person. So I had this intimacy with the group and each individual at the same time. And I found that seductive. I like it.

NEW YORK DIARY

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Just what the doctor ordered

Thomas Kovachevich is a downtown Manhattan fixture as Tribeca's doctor of choice to a host of artists and writers. And though Kovachevich may have long traded works with his numerous artist friends and patients such as Richard Tuttle, he has always remained delightfully discreet about his own career as an artist. But this man was specially chosen by the late curator Harald Szeemann to star in his 1972 Documenta. Kovachevich has also had many sponsors and collectors over the decades,

not least advertising guru Jay Chiat whose two favourite living artists were the dear doctor and Damien Hirst and who boldly risked, and lost, a sizeable sum on the doctor's most ambitious work of concept-art. This was back in 1990 when Kovachevich decided to launch a scheme of "Doctors by Phone" whereby anyone feeling poorly could call a doctor who would deal with their problem for a nominal fee. This complex project involved mass advertising and multi-media marketing, for it was always intended as a Beuys-style "social art work", and was swiftly killed by the US medical establishment who saw it as an alternative to their practices. A sample of recent paintings by Kovachevich (above, *The Seed*, 2006) goes on show this month with Lightbox in Los Angeles (19 May-23 June), a welcome reminder of his protean talents.



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