

HANS ULRICH-OBRIST AND JERÓNIMO ELESPE IN CONVERSATION

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: I wanted to start by asking you about your beginnings: how you came to art or how art came to you. Was there an initial epiphany?

Jerónimo Elespe: It was quite gradual. I always liked to draw and paint as a child, and I was interested in art, but I never actually thought of becoming an artist until pretty late in life. When I was a kid, my father, who loves painting, would show my brother and me slide projections of Spanish art. However, even though it was in my system from very early on, I never thought it would be an option until much later, when I was at university in Madrid. I was studying economics. But of course, I wasn't *studying* economics: I hated it! I hardly ever went to class. One day my parents finally sat me down, and asked 'Why don't you do what you want to do?' And that was it. We started looking for options and finally I decided to go to New York to study fine arts.

HUO: It's fascinating that your father would show you slide shows. Can you tell me more about them?

JE: He showed us mostly the old masters of Spanish art, such as Velázquez, Goya and El Greco, but also cave paintings, Renaissance art... That was very important for my artistic development, as became apparent later on. I never thought it was boring, actually, even though I was very young at the time. I found it fascinating. Only until fifteen years later when I became an artist (or whatever I am right now) did I think about those slide projections. So I really owe my parents a lot. Then, when I was at university and didn't know what to do with my life my father went to the art store, bought me some brushes and paint and taught me how to use them. It really does come from home.

HUO: So is your father an artist or a collector? What is his connection to art?

JE: No, he's not an artist or a collector. He paints in his free time—a Sunday painter, as they say in America. He's retired now, so he draws and paints whenever. He likes it. He's very cultured, with many degrees. I was always surrounded by books when I was growing up thanks to him and to my mom, who's also a big reader and always took me to museums as a kid. But they're not artists, they just like art, both old and contemporary. I guess my father always wanted to be one, so maybe I'm fulfilling that path [*laughs*], I don't know.

HUO: Who would you say were your influences in your early days as a student in New York?

JE: That's a tricky question... or a tricky answer, rather. Since my parents exposed me to art history early on, all my early influences were old masters rather than modernists or contemporary artists. The old Spanish masters had a big effect on me, and still do, but more than just Spanish artists I was influenced by all the usual suspects that can be found at the Prado, such as Goya and Velázquez, also Flemish artists Patinir, Bosch, Brueghel and Dürer, which I think you can see in my current work to a great extent. When it comes to more contemporary artists, even to this day I have a hard time answering that question and every time I do it's a completely different list, which I actually get quite a kick out of.

HUO: I think at a certain moment your own visual language sets in—it's something that happens to every artist. Gerhard Richter defined his *catalogue raisonné* very early on. In the sixties he made his painting of a blurred table. I was wondering what work is number one in your *catalogue raisonné*.

JE: Oh, well I still have it. It's at my parents' house on the outskirts of Madrid, upstairs—a strange cityscape. It's fifty or sixty centimetres tall, so it's slightly bigger than what I'm working on right now. It's a weird one, a very weird one. But it's still there and it's holding up! It's right at the entrance of a summer studio I have there, so I have to face it every time I paint at their house. There are some other very early ones that I love, but I don't have them anymore and it's a real pity. Every now and then when I see one of those I still see the lineage from the early ones, made here in Spain, to the pieces I made when I moved to New York, in the mid-nineties, to the work I'm doing right now. It's surprising to see that the connection is still there. It kind of freaks me out, actually. I went to my brother's house the other day and saw a couple of early paintings of mine that he has, which I hadn't seen in years, combined with some newer ones and I was really surprised to see that they feel like very obvious sets. Some of the old ones were bigger, but despite the roughness, or maybe because of it, there is an emphasis on the material quality, just like in the new ones. The preoccupation with experimenting with different painting languages and dealing with interiors and domestic life is still pretty much the same. Most important, I saw that the older works have the same sentiment as the new ones; a kind of sadness.

HUO: The first works that I saw of yours were these very recognisable small-format works, very reduced, painted on panels—very often, aluminium panels in which there is a strong condensation happening. I was wondering if you could tell me about the moment you had this idea. Do you remember the day you thought of it?

JE: It was gradual, but I do remember. As I was saying, the small pieces have a connection with the bigger work. I was already working on some small paintings at the School of Visual Arts in New York, but by the time I went to Yale University I was also making mid-sized paintings of about one or two metres. Not huge. Then towards the end of my studies there I slowly went back to making smaller works for a variety of reasons. I suppose one of them was that I wanted to emphasise the object quality of them. I think of them as very personal objects. By working on such small surfaces with very clinical aluminium edges that contrasted with the dream-like imagery, they become even more personal to me. Of course, to me the paintings are the size they need to be and I don't even consider it most of the time— they are how they are. But I do remember the moment I decided to make that leap.

It was also based a lot on the installation component of them, how they all worked together in the same room. That's what I was thinking about back then, at school. If the space is fairly big, when you first enter the room, the only thing you notice is a number of very flat, small rectangles and squares on the walls. Because of the muted colours, they seem almost black from a distance and only when you get much closer to them do you begin to realise the imagery there. So even at a distance, if they are hung on the wall with a certain amount of space between them it's almost impossible to see more than one or two at the same time. This means that if the viewer wants to see a previous work again he has to go back, retrace his steps and see all the paintings all over again until he finds the right one. He will probably get lost in the process and create a new narrative. So the installation was crucial when choosing the size of the paintings. By making the paintings so small and non-present, the act of looking actually becomes very physical and time-based. So in the end these gaps between the small works became as important as the paintings themselves.

I guess this resulted from two strong influences I had at the time, Barry Le Va and Mel Bochner, who were very supportive teachers of mine. They were quite important to me even though our practices are so different. Through Barry Le Va I reached the idea of making works that act like marks or clues or scars for a larger narrative and make the viewers engage in a physical in which they mimic what the artist did in the studio, in a way. So I suppose there were many reasons why I took the leap and began making small works.

HUO: There's an interesting text by Dan Byers in your catalogue in which he talks about slowness, which is something I experience when looking at your paintings. It seems that one discovers more and more things when looking at them. At the beginning one sees dark paintings and then, upon further examination, you actually discover worlds in them, which somehow seems analogous to the slow creation of your work. Can you tell us if the creative process is actually slow for you? I'm also curious to know how exactly you make your paintings and if photography plays a role.

JE: Almost never at all, photography. Only sometimes if I need a very strong reference of a certain piece of fabric or something like that, but I always paint from memory. Most of the time it's a very slow process of months or even years that consists of adding and subtracting many layers of paint, sometimes very carefully and sometimes less so. I mistreat those surfaces and abuse them through experimenting with them, which is one of the reasons I paint on aluminium panels: it's a hard and fairly noble surface that allows me to abuse it for a long time. For months and years I find the panels and scrape them and repaint them and try to find the images I want. Through this process of adding and subtracting over and over the paintings take on a life of their own and I let them dictate what is needed. At some point I step back and let the painting achieve its own internal logic.

I often completely overwork these paintings even if they were already successful or interesting. I ruin them, consciously, out of a compulsion or curiosity to keep dealing with them to see what happens, and that's fine. I continue to work on them throughout that 'ruined' phase, actually. Sometimes what's more important to me is what's hidden underneath. As long as I know that it's there, to me that's what matters. I guess this is something I do with my own life—I walk away from things I love and sometimes I rediscover them years later. Maybe that's what's going on with these hidden paintings.

I guess one of the paradoxes of painting is how time-based it is. Even if we're just talking about a still object hanging quietly on a wall, it involves memory and time in every stage of both its creation and its contemplation. When you are working on such a piece you have to keep remembering what you did just before and keep track, at a subconscious level, of the millions of decisions you make every second. Then you multiply that by the amount of weeks or months or years that it takes to make a painting and at the end you compress it all into one single image that can be looked at for a second or for a lifetime, it depends. I think that's why painting is such a powerful medium, because of that compression, that process of adding and subtracting. It is then that they become abstract diaries of some sort.

HUO: I suppose the fact that you don't use photography that much also has to do with memory, and I'm also interested in how the work seems to activate viewers' memories. Yesterday I rewatched *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, a film by Julian Schnabel about a man who has a locked-in syndrome and can no longer communicate. At one point he says the only thing he hasn't lost to locked-in syndrome is his memory and imagination. There are some amazing images of his memories in the film.

While I was preparing this interview I was thinking about how the viewer's memory gets activated by looking at these images, which is interesting, as we live in an age where information grows exponentially by the minute. While we do this interview this information will probably almost double. However, as Rem Koolhaas once pointed out, more information does not mean more memory. It may be that amnesia is at the core of the digital age due to our dependence on our iPhones and Google, which might be diminishing our memory. Now whenever we have a conversation and something comes to mind, even over dinner we say 'I'll go on Google'. So I don't think it's a coincidence that more artists are working on memory. What is your relationship with memory?

JE: I agree one hundred percent. That's one of the things I like about painting. When you work with painting you always wonder why you've chosen it, since it's such an anachronistic medium. You wonder if it's really the right medium for 2014 or if it's already exhausted, and I think one of the reasons to keep doing it is precisely everything you just said. It really goes against the grain of all these new tools we have, which—as positive as they are—are making us amnesic, I agree.

So through this process we were just discussing, the diaries and memories that were built and accumulated over months and years still have a haunting presence even after they have been hidden. And even if no one can see it, you can feel it, which is something very unique to painting. It is a really big theme in my work and the content is also related to the images of domestic life and interiors that pervade my work, which tend to be very autobiographical. The fact that I don't want to deal with photography to remember all these personal experiences is key. For me, photography is usually just a platform from which to begin to explore different ideas about painting. I'm very interested in themes of domestic life or family life. My work is informed by an endless stream of narratives and fictions and lives, which can be a metaphor for art. Those fictions and lives are nothing but memories that are being twisted by time, sometimes at your own will. From a very early age domestic life becomes a sphere in which we both act and witness an endless overlap of stories and memories—some fake, some true, but all of which are very necessary for survival. In the end, what you make of those lives and real stories can be more important than whether they are actually true and I think this ambiguity in paintings goes hand in hand with the ambiguity that exists in domestic life.

HUO: You bring up domesticity, which is something that is also present in a lot of your work. It starts from experiences that are almost autobiographical, which are connected to domesticity and also to your day-to-day practice in your studio or studio-cum-apartment, as it were. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about the autobiographical aspect of your work and the memory of domesticity. I'm also interested in this idea of your studio, your apartment, having a very direct impact on the work. In your catalogue there is a beautiful poem by Zbigniew Herbert: 'With a light step / he moves / from spot to spot / from fruit to fruit'. This light step, this movement in the studio, is an element that also appears in your work very often.

JE: Yes, it's huge for me. Domestic and studio life are very much intertwined for me. I can't pull them apart. Ever since leaving school I've always worked at home. I don't think I could do it any other way, given my schedule. I usually start working in the afternoon or late evening and then work into the night, sometimes until 8 or 9 a.m. Of course, I usually wake up very late. It's not only because the night is much quieter, but also because of the feeling that there is nothing else to do. There are no distractions or social life; one has to simply face the task at hand. This defines you and helps you make sense of life, at least for me.

The sad thing is I love mornings, and I do miss them some days, so sometimes I go for a walk before going to sleep just so I can see the morning. My life is not always nocturnal but it is most of the time. It slowly, gradually changes. I guess I have what NASA calls Martian jetlag. On Mars the days are forty minutes longer than on Earth, so in ground control for Martian missions the crew has to live on Martian time and each day is forty minutes longer than the previous one. So their schedule slowly changes and slowly goes out of whack. I guess that's what happens with my life [laughs], which is why my paintings have a half-awake, half-asleep quality to them. For all those reasons, my home life and my studio life are completely joined together and I think my paintings benefit from it. It gives them an added intensity in both the experimental quality of them and the actual content and subject matter. I find very interesting the idea of our domestic cycles and of how the repetition of cycles can actually help creativity if you channel it the right way, which I guess is what happens in monasteries. Ultimately my life is pretty repetitive, and thanks to that I can really focus on my own creative process, which is contradictory but it works.

HUO: In your paintings there are often elements such as objects, rooms or references to furniture that seem to be memories of domestic scenes but also abstract elements and people, faces, portraiture. There is a lot of discussion now about portraiture in our time, because there have never been more portraits made in the world than today. Billions of 'selfies' are basically exploding into the digital world, so I think it's interesting to talk about your portraits, which are very different from portraits taken with an iPhone as yours are done much more slowly. I was wondering how works such as *R.* (2010–2011) or *María Z, Again...* (2011) come about. Are live models involved or is it all from memory?

JE: I guess I'm slowly building a fictional family with these portraits, parallel to my own. At first my portraits were mostly of family members and friends and they were always painted from memory, which is why some of the features are so similar to mine, or to my brother's or my parents'. Then I slowly let them evolve and take on a life of their own and let their different mannerisms and formal evolutions dictate the paintings during the months and years that it can take to develop them. Some of them end up looking like self-portraits, which I find interesting within the context of a whole exhibition and also regarding the implications of switching from third person to first person, which is also a result of the influence of literature on my work. It goes back to the idea of being both present and absent and playing with autobiography and falseness. So yes, those portraits are key parts of my work, especially within the context of an entire installation and in relation to the abstractions.

HUO: The ideas of oscillation, figuration and abstraction are something that Gerhard Richter has pioneered for many decades, if you take for example his over-painted photographs in which all of a sudden the painted parts seem photographic and the photographic parts seem painted. Looking at your paintings I see on the one hand very abstract paintings, like *Los sordos*, and then paintings like *Venomous*, where you have very figurative elements dissolving into—with the exception of the faces and the hands—a more abstract realm. I was wondering if you could tell me more about this and also about your connection to Gerhard Richter.

JE: A lot of elements that you might see coming out of these abstractions depend on the viewer. In many instances they are ghost images from previous paintings that are hidden underneath. I keep hiding the images under many layers and then I take these layers away by sanding the surfaces so that some of the parts come out. I am constantly reacting to the painting, slowly choosing, by accident, what to keep and what to discard. This means that a lot of the parts that are there from previous stories are then incorporated into a new narrative, which I think is very relevant to the diaristic aspect of my work.

Sometimes I work on a painting for such a long time that at a certain point it takes a left turn and becomes completely abstract, even if it started off as a portrait. I'm not going to say which ones [*laughs*], but they're there. Many have an architectural or figurative element. Most of the time even the very abstract ones start off with very autobiographical, literal imagery, which then, if I destroy the painting, overlaps with new layers and turns the painting into a purely experimental abstraction. I do consider these abstracts very important for letting the viewer know what they should be looking at. They are key works in that sense, in conjunction with other paintings, but I also find them completely autonomous; they are not just there to contextualize the others. As I was saying before, it's very important for me to know that there is stuff hiding underneath, just like Visconti, the filmmaker, who when shooting a period film would ask his production team to stock the closets with period clothes even if the closets were to remain closed during a shot. He just wanted to know that the clothes were there. He would drive people crazy with these demands, but I do sympathise. To me all those elements are essential. I need to know that they are there.

As for Richter, the influence is there and it's huge, as I'm sure it is for any painter that has come after him, but I'm slightly ambivalent. Of course I'm a huge fan, but it's funny because if you think about everything we were talking about, most of my creative processes would be the opposite of his. I don't use photos, for instance...

Ultimately we come full circle and end up meeting in similar places. Of course, he's a giant and I'm not! But I do find it interesting that as much of a follower as I am I think my process and initial take is very different to his, also because of the generation that I came of age with, probably. Sigmar Polke is another big influence.

HUO: I think it was Panofsky who once said 'We often invent the future out of fragments of the past', and that seems to be very much your process because you start with, not necessarily appropriation but repetition, one might say. It's an interesting distinction. Elaine Sturtevant's work deals with repetition; she repeats the works of other artists. You start, seemingly to me, with a similar process of repeating a Velázquez or an Antonello da Messina or another painter and then, through addition and subtraction, you paint and paint until you are left with just the ghost of the previous image, as you describe beautifully.

Just to understand this idea of repetition and difference a little bit more, I wanted to ask you to describe how that process works, how you copy or repeat a piece from history and if it also comes from memory, like the portraits of your friends.

JE: It comes from memory, but of course those influences are ingrained in my mind, so there is no way to shake them out. In that sense I don't need to appropriate that much because it's part of me, maybe because of my upbringing and going to the Prado so often with my parents and seeing those slide projections. The idea of repetition is definitely present in my work, so I'm glad you picked up on it. It's a key part of my practise. I guess it's like what John Peel from the BBC said about the band The Fall:

'Always different and always the same', so it's very important to keep the repetition going and then examine the images together. That's when things start ticking. All of this is much easier to see and experience with the drawings than with the paintings.

I've been working on these drawings for a long time, almost as long as the aluminium panels, but now for the show at Ivorypress I want to present the drawings in groups for the first time and I want to display them horizontally, not vertically. I work on the paintings upright, on the wall and I always work on the drawings on a table, laid flat. So there is a huge difference for me when it comes to the physical part of experiencing the work. I want to put the drawings in vitrines in groups of fifteen or twenty, to emphasise the repetition. It's going to be a key part of the show, as it will help the viewers understand the process behind the paintings and will also let them know what to look at.

HUO: I'm very familiar with your paintings but I've never seen your drawings. It's interesting, because obviously this book will be published on the occasion of the exhibition at Ivorypress, so whilst people read this interview they will see the exhibition with these tables of drawings. It would be great if you could tell us a little bit more about them and also what their significance is in your creative process. They seem to play a role in the beginning and during the process of drawing, but do you also continue to draw afterwards, once the painting is finished?

JE: The show will have aluminium panels, drawings and some slightly different paintings, which we'll talk about later. I work on the drawings at the same time as the paintings and as sketches. I consider them completely autonomous works, and I don't think of the process as being very different to that of the paintings. I find it pretty similar, except for the actual physical part of working on them at a desk or on the wall, as I said before.

What varies is probably how the viewer sees them and how they interpret the paintings. I think the drawings are much easier to read than the paintings in terms of showing the constant process of subtraction and addition. It's more clinical. And since we're going to present them in groups of fifteen or twenty, it will be much easier to understand the connection between pieces, even though some of the pieces were started in 2003 and some are from 2014. The date doesn't matter to me. I travel with the drawings more often for practical reasons. The paintings are very small but you know, they're messy—they're oils, so they take time to dry. The drawings I can take with me and I always do. That's why I was telling you the other day that if I go to London to see you I can carry a bunch, because I'm always with them. They're small, most of them only four or five inches at the most... Some of them are very painful to make, I have to say. The very abstract ones are torture, depending on the day I'm having.

HUO: I wanted to ask you about your use of colour, because you use a lot of black and white and grey. People such as Runge and Goethe and even Itten have an elaborate colour theory, so I was wondering if you have one as well or if you use colours intuitively. I also want to ask you what your favourite colours are, because there seems to be something very nocturnal about your work, which seems to connect to the fact that you mainly work at night.

JE: I suppose they are nocturnal... Of course I have pretty good artificial light in my studio, but I can't help being influenced by what's going on outside, and looking through the windows and seeing darkness. That's probably the truest explanation. Also, again, I'm obviously influenced to a great extent by the golden age of Spanish painting, like Zurbarán with his greys, or Velázquez—some of his paintings have a very limited palette, if you think about it, but he does a lot with it nevertheless—or many other lesser-known still-life painters like El Labrador or Yepes... I try not to think about it too much, I just let it happen. At Yale University's art school they were a bit concerned about my overuse of greys. Josef Albers went there to teach after Black Mountain College and his colour theory class is still taught there, so they suggested I take it [*laughs*]. They meant well, but you know, if I use grey it's because I like using grey! I guess I don't have a twentieth-century figure that I follow or am influenced by when it comes to colour. It just goes back to my bad nocturnal habits. We'll see, maybe one day I'll change and I'll become a day person, who knows.

HUO: I'm sorry we're doing this interview at midday, it must be too early for you!

JE: It's kind of crazy but I don't mind it. Some days I wake up earlier and it's actually okay. At night I'm usually painting, so it would probably be even weirder to talk at night when I'm supposed to be working, you know? This is more natural, somehow. As unnatural as it is for me to be talking on the phone about my work! I know you're an early riser, so for a while because I know you wake up very early I thought well, maybe we could talk at 5 a.m.!

HUO: That would have been interesting! I also wanted to ask you about literature. I was very thrilled to read Zbigniew Herbert's poem in your catalogue. Somehow we have a situation where, in the twentieth century, in all historic avant-gardes, literature and art are very connected, like in surrealism, for instance, with the Lorca-Dalí friendship. In our time there seems to be a little bit less of a connection between art and poetry and art and literature. Many of the things you talk about, down to the title of this book, very often have a connection to literature or poetry.

JE: Yes, well it's huge and I completely agree with you. In contemporary fine arts the connection between literature and art has kind of disappeared, but maybe it will return. How can we have lost that, right? But in my case it's there. Both with poetry and lately more with actual fiction, like novels and of course also film. I definitely feel a connection between my work and what writers deal with in terms of falseness, the intertwining of fiction and reality, multiple layers, monastic life, the whole idea of being both present and absent... You could say that I'm influenced by literature both thematically and in spirit.

A lot of the writers I'm interested in seem to have nothing to do with my practice, like Thomas Pynchon, J.G. Ballard or William Burroughs or Nabokov, but they have all influenced my work either in their subject matter or, as I was saying, in their actual spirit and their attitude towards their medium. I guess if Thomas Pynchon, for example, influences my work, as strange as that may seem, it's because of his love of excessive detail and his care and referential knowledge about the history of his medium—among other things—, which is something you can feel in every single line of his novels and which I can only hope to achieve one day in my paintings and drawings. On a more thematic level one of the many things that attracts me to Pynchon is his attention and references to Rilke, who is always a constant presence in my studio.

J.G. Ballard is another writer who also seems to have nothing to do with my work, but his sense of space and confined quarters is something I'm really interested in. To go back to your previous question about my colour palette, I think Ballard is probably an influence for me [*laughs*]! I guess I try to work his greys into my paintings. As for his writing, I'm not just thinking of his most famous books, like *The Atrocity Exhibition* or *Crash*, but more of works like *High Rise*, which for me is one of his best ones, or *Running Wild*, which is a lesser work but one I've always liked a lot and which also deals with very confined spaces. Tanizaki, the Japanese writer, is also very important for me.

HUO: *In Praise of Shadows?*

JE: Yeah, definitely! A beautiful essay. His fiction is also very relevant to my paintings and drawings. In most of his stories, like in his most famous one, *The Tattooer*, everything comes off balance at a single moment, and this defines the whole story in a very subtle way, which is something I hope to do.

HUO: That's fascinating, because I knew Ballard and I even interviewed him. You mention a lot of writers from previous generations, which is interesting. Is there anybody in literature working today with whom you collaborate or talk to, in that sort of tradition of Lorca and Dalí? Who is your Lorca?

JE: Oh, I don't have one and it's a shame! I really don't. I think it's partly due to the fact that I live in Madrid now after living in New York for many, many years. I think moving here has been really good for my work, because New York was getting a bit crazy for me and was a little too much. It's much easier for me to concentrate here. On the other hand, I do feel like I'm lacking some dialogue now, so I'm starting to consider moving back to New York at some point to try to find those dialogues again. I still have them though, maybe not with writers but with musicians or filmmakers. I suppose my only artistic dialogue here in Madrid is my wife, who is an experimental filmmaker from Thailand.

HUO: I'm also curious about artists of your own generation, because in the eighties there was a very internationally-known, vibrant painting scene in Spain that included Lluís Claramunt, and also of course Miquel Barceló and José María Sicilia and Ferran García Sevilla. This whole generation, even though they were very different as artists, were often spoken about together and were part of a Spanish painting context. You however, are seen, twenty years later, as a singular figure—which is certainly true—, but I was wondering if there are other artists in Spain of your own generation whom you talk to, go to the bar with, have an exchange with... Is there a group of artists in Spain right now?

JE: I think there is, but I'm on my own. Of course there are groups, but they're not as close-knit as they used to be, that's for sure. I'm kind of a lone wolf here, also because of my development. I went to the US when I was very young and studied high school in Mississippi, in the South. Then I came back to Spain for a couple of years, because I didn't know what to do with my life, and that's when I decided to go to New York. So in the mid-nineties I went back to the US and I stayed there for over twelve years. Now I'm back and in that sense I'm pretty much on my own. I'm, as you say, a singularity. Sometimes it's kind of tough and sometimes I get a real kick out of it, because it's how I work, but most of my painting and musician peers are in New York and I really miss them. So far I'm doing fine with my weird, strange, quiet life in Madrid, but we'll see. I don't know how long I can do it.

HUO: Who are your peers in New York?

JE: There are classmates that I've stayed in touch with for, in some cases, fifteen years, so they are solid, very good friends. Perhaps we are very different, but we have remained together in a way, even though we're in different continents. For example, Zak Smith went to Yale with me and right now he's on the West Coast, in L.A., making porno movies, but he's still painting as well. We became very good friends in art school and he's actually the one who got me into Thomas Pynchon. Dave Miko, Sean McCarthy, Cy Admundson, Kristin Baker and musicians like Jeffrey Lewis are also my peers. Many of them were classmates and all of them are great people and very supportive peers for many years to come, I'm sure.

I've also remained friends with some former teachers, although we are from very different generations, like Sean Landers for example, who was a strong influence, and still is, in my development, as well as being a very important teacher and friend. It's like what I was saying before about Barry Le Va, or Bochner, or Peter Halley, who was also a great teacher. Stephen Ellis, who was a teacher at SVA, a great painter, was crucial to my development and he is still a good friend. He introduced me to Juan Uslé—who, speaking of Spanish painters, has also been key in my development—and he's still someone I can pick up the phone and call to talk about what I'm doing without any complexes or problems.

HUO: It's interesting that you mention Sean Landers because he is a painter but he also writes a lot, which brings me to ask you about your own writing. Do you write diaries, sentences, novels?

JE: I do write a lot, yeah, but I haven't shown it to anyone yet. Not even my wife, actually. Maybe one day I will. Some of it is fiction and some of it is more diaristic and small essays. I don't know if they're good or not. I think they might be okay. I do play music and I know that my music sucks—I'm positive about that—, but I think my writing might be okay, actually. One day I'll show it to you. I don't know if Sean is an influence on that. My writing is very, very different from his, I have to say. But Sean was a big influence for me as a student in many other ways. Some of the exercises he gave us back in school were quite amazing and they really made an impact on all of us.

HUO: Can you tell me more about your writing? I want to know more about your writing!

JE: [*Laughs*] I don't know! One day, Hans Ulrich, one day...

HUO: There are a few last things I wanted to ask you. First of all I have this project on Instagram and Twitter where, as a movement to protest against the disappearance of handwriting, I post one or two sentences every day: a motto or a philosophical or artistic sentence by an artist, a poet, a novelist. It's a project to celebrate handwriting, because it's about to disappear in the age of computers and we need to bring it back.

JE: It's such a shame, yeah.

HUO: Exactly, and I would love to publish a sentence of yours, so it would be wonderful if you could send one to publish on my Twitter and Instagram.

JE: That would be beautiful. I'll do it soon, definitely. It'll be my first published writing ever!
[laughter]

HUO: Yes, that's very exciting! I was wondering also if you have any dreams. I'm very interested in artists' unrealised projects: endeavours that have been too big or too small to be realised, ideas for projects, forgotten projects... We know a lot about architects' unrealised projects but we know almost nothing about those of even well known artists.

JE: That's a great question. In parallel to all these aluminium panels and tiny drawings, I've been working on bigger paintings all these years that I haven't shown. If some of them are finished on time I might show them for the Ivorypress show in November. There are two or three of them, and they're they're only about five feet long, but you know, huge for me. For the longest time I've considered them my unrealised projects, unrealised dreams. Some of them are coming along quite nicely, but I don't know if they will be finished between now and the show. We'll see. Speaking of writing, I would like to write more consistently and to publish, so that is another unrealised dream, because I'm writing but I'm not putting it out there.

HUO: One of the things I was intrigued about when reading your catalogue is that you also work with the moving image. There is *Kang Kobk*, a digital video from 2011 that is very dark, with night colours and a sort of frog and then there's *Howng Phawaat*, also from 2011, which seems to be a more painterly transfer of the digital video. What kind of role does digital technology play in your process and where do these videos fit in, in relation to the paintings?

JE: Those two works are a collaboration with Chantip Yodprachong, my wife. She's currently in Thailand working on a project. Her body of work is quite different from mine, but it shares some similarities such as the diaristic aspect. Those two videos function almost as diaries, actually, as much as the paintings do. The second one, as you can see, has some drawings—those are the actual drawings that I work on. I don't know if you can see them well in the book. I'll show you the real ones soon. Some of them take me years to make, actually. They are very detailed.

To answer your question, digital technology plays a strange role in my work because my paintings and my drawings transfer horribly into JPEGs. It's becoming a defining feature in my career. We live in an age of such an obsession with or need for digital media that we are losing all these analogue, very valid things. Not to be a reactionary, but some things are just good the way they are, so I take certain pride in my work being almost impossible to photograph well. I always have these conversations with galleries and institutions that say 'Oh, we have a great photographer. We want to do it right, it's going to look beautiful', and then it just never works, they never quite translate into photographs. I know this happens to every painter, but in my case it's especially difficult because of the surfaces and the size and the reflective quality of the aluminium. It's almost impossible to shoot my work well. So my relationship with digital media is kind of ambivalent and nice and I just like that it's there. It's a nice nemesis that keeps me on my toes and reminds me why I choose to paint and draw, which is quite important. Not that I don't like digital media—I like it a lot when it has a reason to be, I suppose. I do like the tension between digital and analogue, which is one of the nice things about your handwriting project, that strange tension between one of the oldest mediums and the newest one... They're almost selfies what you're asking us to do, right? Like handwritten selfies [*laughs*].

HUO: Yes, very good! That's a great answer. I have one very last question, almost like a post-question to the interview: Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this lovely little book gives advice to a young poet. What would be your advice in 2014 for a young art student?

JE: That's a very pertinent question because I just got an e-mail from a Cooper Union student the other day. She's an undergrad who is in her senior year and she's doing a presentation of her final work. She's scared and uncertain as to how she should go about it. I don't know her, but she wrote me to ask for advice on how to face this and I thought that in a way it was just like Rilke's letters. I've been thinking about this for the last couple of days and of course, I know I'm going to have to start like Rilke, who in every single one of his letters apologises for his delayed response. So that's the first thing I will have to say: 'Sorry I'm writing late. I've been thinking about your letter a lot'. Then I would tell her something that relates very much to the Sean Landers influence: Just put everything out there, and if you feel afraid and if you feel uncomfortable and if you feel excited, all at once, it means you are on the right track. I think that's a good start to begin with, to let her know that all those feelings she is going through are actually a sign she is probably doing the right thing.

HUO: I could not think of a better conclusion. Thank you so much.