



The following conversation combines two recorded sessions, the first of which took place on May 3, 2005, the last day of Jane's exhibition at Galerie Lelong. We focused mainly on the paper works and paintings there, and especially on Jane's recent foray into photography. The second session took place about two months later at Jane's Grand Street studio on a beautiful day in July. After reviewing both transcripts and realizing that many of the same topics were discussed more cogently in the second session, we opted for this interview as the primary text and gleaned from the first when appropriate. The final text was revised and edited by both of us in several e-mail exchanges. —D.D.

DOUGLAS DREISHPOON:

The exhibition being organized by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum concentrates on paper, a most ephemeral material, ancient even, and something you've consistently gravitated to for your work.

JANE HAMMOND:

I make many different kinds of works on paper. Some of them are photographs, some prints, many unique objects, but paper ends up being a huge part of my practice. I think it's becoming even bigger, and I'm starting to brew up a theory about this that revolves around the fact that my work is fundamentally about information. You know the context has really changed around my work. And I would have to say that it has "come up" underneath me. For example, when I first

started giving slide lectures, I would make the comment that my work was like recombinant DNA, in its polyglot nature, its lexicon, and combination of elements in different ways to make figurative paintings, nonfigurative paintings, paintings with flat space, or deep space, or whatever. People would always double-take on that word, "recombinant," because it was a relatively rarely used word fifteen years ago. Now, it's an everyday word. The huge explosion of information on the Internet has made it easy to combine and recombine. The culture of rap music also has really grown up around this idea and practice. Rap is recombinant.

It's no accident that I mention the Internet and music together because the thing they have in common is bodilessness—the bodilessness of information is the recombiner's pleasure. And I think that this marries with paper. Paper is less corporeal than stretchers, than wood; it's almost like ether. And when I'm in the mood for something closer to pure information, closer to music, closer to language—because language is the most bodiless—I'm in the mood for paper. It's less freighted with a lot of corpus.

DD

Talk to me about bodilessness. Does it privilege the mind?

JH

I think of myself as both a conceptual artist involved with a lot of very "mental" ideas and as

someone who loves making things by hand. I started out as a sculptor. I made large objects and videos. When I moved to New York, I started making some things on paper because I had five jobs, no money. I was afraid to stop working, the way you're afraid to stop jogging, because it's too hard to get started again. I had all the biases against painting that many who came of age in the late 1970s had. Barry Le Va was my favorite artist in graduate school. So, out of those drawings I sort of backed into making paintings. And then I liked paintings. I am sort of a "more-is-more" person and I felt like you could get more information into a painting because it was less *bodied* than a sculpture. Those early drawings led me to painting and painting led me to printmaking and other types of drawing. But it is something about this increased bodilessness and this ability to hold more different kinds of information that attracts me. Recently, I have even made some Mylar pieces, which have almost no color and are quite transparent. And then the photos, they're very unbodied. As I pull information from radically different contexts and combine and recontextualize things, well, I think it's more elastic the more bodiless the information is. This is different from how painting feels. Paper has no smell, you know.

I am reading this book right now, which is a leftie-critique of copyright law. And it's very smart. The author makes the point that this entity, which in our culture now is referred to as "intellectual property," was something Thomas Jefferson thought of as intellectual policy. It's interesting and perhaps strange that we think of ideas as things. And you can see that this dove-

tails with Marxism, because if you weren't so hung up about property, you wouldn't be so upset about sharing. And the author traces this idea of intellectual property in contradistinction to certain African American traditions such as the blues, where ideas of authorship were different. At the heart of it were ideas of touching communal signs, of sharing, and of your "version." It's completely different from what we were brought up to believe about Pollock or Picasso as these lone geniuses. But you realize that part of this whole thing has to do with the fact that before *records* (commodities), there is just singing. One of these musicians, not Muddy Waters, but someone of his era, refers to the blues as "air" music, that the songs are in the air, which likens the singer to a kind of early radio, a receiver, a downloader. It feels to me like the Internet is kind of air in this sense of "air music." This is really exciting, because I feel that the way I've been working, I've been riding a wave for twenty years and the water just got thinner, swooshier, and slipperier. It's more like air, like air music.

DD

If ideas are as ephemeral as air, then the capitalist notion of private property and the modernist myth of originality seem like moot constructs.

JH

Yes, and, importantly, they're constructs that braid together.

DD

Right, but you're talking about bypassing a system, perhaps not even a system but an anti-system, where things are naturally present and available. The notion of oral tradition brings us back to language, questions of who owns it, and whether it's a unique formulation or something that accommodates every human being who internalizes it.

JH

And every specific time they use it. I see this lexicon of mine—the language it makes and the way it creates meaning—as a living thing capable of infinite variation. But I am also still a big collector of its elements. I go to flea markets and fairs and dealers now. I collect photographs madly. I can't wait to get up in the morning and go. Prowling through book fairs is another thing I love. I don't know, I guess I am like a collector, or like a trapper.

DD

I'm reminded of Breton's anointed circle of surrealists and their outings to flea markets in search of sundry objects, associative triggers for visual and lingual images.

JH

Yes, but I have a slightly different idea about this than the Surrealists. The Surrealists had too much respect for their own subconscious. They also had a privileged hierarchy of signs—you know, shit, fire, etc. I'm really interested in seeing these new things out in the world, as collaboration. I've always worked with found information, with elements originating in the world, in the voice of an "other." I don't know if that's as obvious to other people as it is to me. Because I've largely translated it into paint, and because I have an active hand in the process of painting, it may seem so "mine." And of course a great deal of my being is in there. But when I talk to myself about my paintings, I always use this word "jammed." It's a reference to how each constituent element in the painting is coming from a disparate source, from another culture, from another time. Each one is freighted with the way they drew in England in the 1890s, or an Art Deco sensibility, or the way woodcuts looked

in Germany in 1500, or Chinese ink drawings. And I've always valued these inconsistencies. You know, there is a rabbit on a branch; the branch is much more detailed than the rabbit is; the branch is seen from the left; the rabbit is seen from the right. That's what I call jamming. I like the collision of the otherness, of the voices behind my voice. So, when I'm at the flea market, I'm not seeing this thing as something that is going to trigger my powerful, authorial, supreme unconscious, which is very André Breton to me. I see it as a bit of collaboration, where I have left some space for the voice of the other person. And I actually believe that leaving that space is what ends up allowing the viewer to enter when the piece is done. It's not only about me.

DD

What you've just described reflects the difference between Freud and Jung: solipsistic politics and ego yielding to mythic archetypes with multiple identities. What I'm hearing is that you're the medium for your own story's voice, as well as for other voices, as embodied in other images.

JH

Yes, I agree with that, but I am also willing to go to a place where I am a kind of mixologist, and after I made this mix, you and I together, and this guy down the street will figure out what it means. That is interesting to me, too.

DD

Let's get back to paper. Paper equates with drawing and drawing equates with the germination of ideas. Ideas sketched on paper easily bypass expectations because they generate spontaneously.

JH

Well, that's the traditional idea about drawing, that it is generative.

DD

Is that true given the way you work?

JH

I certainly don't see drawing as a preparatory medium. I sometimes get an idea first as a paper piece, but I've also made paper pieces that came out of paintings that came before.

I also don't see myself as someone who "draws" as much as I see myself as someone who makes things with paper. I think I'm privileging paper over the pencil. I certainly am a great lover of paper. I have almost a collection of paper in my drawers and then when you add in all the books I have, and the paper ephemera, and now hundreds and hundreds of photographs. Well, I'm really in love with paper, in many forms, and printing, too.

One thing I do believe about paintings is that when you make a painting, you make a decision, sort of an armchair decision in a way, beforehand, about its size and shape. And that decision is pretty incontrovertible. With works on paper you can change that all along. That's a pretty fundamental difference.

I really don't think too much about essential differences between media. I would rather ponder a discovered particularity than construct a generalization. It's not an accident that my show is called *Paper Work* because "paper work" is a very open phrase that doesn't really imply a medium. It could be painting or photography or printmaking or any combination thereof. I make lots of things that are all printed, but you wouldn't call them prints because they are unique—like the "gampis" or the matchbooks. And they are also hand-painted. My drawings like *Past Time* have lots of solvent transfers, and crayon and graphite frottage, and each sheet of

paper is really a collage of several sheets of different papers glued together. Before I ever took a drawing instrument to them, they were probably more *painted on* than *drawn*. I don't actually have an answer to "what do I think drawing is." Because I don't have a practice that is just drawing, or that is classically drawing, or that is capital-D drawing. I feel like I do all these paper things and they kind of leak and bleed into each other.

DD

Constructive and empirical.

JH

Here's a good example. When I went to make *My Heavens* with Bud Shark, he has a way of doing lithography, where you make the different layers of the lithograph—of which there were twelve in that print—on sheets of Mylar. I had used Mylar before, but not much. His studio is in a very remote place and there is also a Xerox machine there. So you're sort of on a desert island with Mylar and a Xerox machine, at least to a New Yorker. It's funny, because I fell in love with printmaking in a very out-of-the-way place, and when you are in an out-of-the-way place and you have certain things with you, then you really tend to explore what are the seven things I can do with spaghetti, anchovies, and garlic—because the store is too far away. So I started playing around with Mylar. And I started dripping different viscosities of paint on the Mylar. And then I let the drips dry. And they are very cool because you can see that they are drips, but you can see right through them, too. And then I Xeroxed the drips. Which was like some kind of funny trope between reproduction, semiotics, and psychic automatism. But it

just happened. And then I was changing the size of the drips with the Xerox machine. That led to those two Mylar collages that I had in my recent Galerie Lelong show. It's a drawing idea that came out of a printmaking technique. Those drawings with their fractured, glassy look are now suggesting to me the subject, not the technique, for another print.

DD

Any given idea is packed with possibilities.

JH

I'm not thinking I ought to pack them; it is just that this is who I am.

DD

You mentioned systems earlier. There are systems to the way you work, archival systems, not necessarily thematic in the way that someone like Leon Golub preferred to archive his visual fodder, but systematic nonetheless.

JH

But I am changing the criteria for what systematizes it, frequently.

DD

Right. So any viable system is as in flux as the way you deploy it.

JH

Yes. That's smart of you. And that is the "it" of what I am interested in, the sort of feedback loop between what's being said, how the saying affects the "what," and the whole cybernetics of the creation and decoding of meaning.

DD

Given your peripatetic history, you seem primed for the moment.

JH

My boyfriend, Craig, remarked to me recently that the whole idea of a "search," a word that we hear all the time now, is something that has been an essential part of my practice all along.

Half of the time I get ideas in my head and translate them, so to speak, into the language of my lexicon. But the other half of the time I'm searching through this lexicon of information and ideas come from that search. This is why I've made the point that I work both from the inside out and from the outside in—it's a reference to these mirrored processes. Anyhow, a significant part of the time I've been involved in this searching, this surfing, if you will. And links. A great example here is my Ping-Pong photograph, *Perpetual Love*. I had an idea in my head about wanting to make a very polyglot still-life photograph. So I thought I would look for a picture of a Ping-Pong table. I was imagining a broad horizontal surface on which I could park a multitude of objects. So I searched for Ping-Pong and in doing so found a photograph, which is freighted with the Second World War. I was drawn to it because I'm friendly with Judy Pfaff and Trevor Winkfield, both of whom spent their early childhood in postwar England and fondly recall playing in the rubble. But from there I discovered Ping-Pong bondage. I didn't know about Ping-Pong bondage. I'm no bondage expert. A link took me there.

DD

Sounds like the cyber equivalent to the Tower of Babel, with a vast associative matrix.

JH

And the associations aren't always yours. You see, that is what's interesting about the link. It's not the free association of André Breton. It's someone else's idea of a connection. It wasn't anywhere in my brain. I found it. I mean, first there is the Surrealist idea of free association, and then there are fifty years of brain research that basically question the idea of "free." And now, there's another brain in the room.

DD

Maybe "random" would be a better word.

JH

But it isn't completely random. "Random" would be, for example, you throw all these photos into the hopper and a blindfolded person pulls one out. There's a link in that computer's mind, so to speak, between Ping-Pong and bondage that doesn't tie into any childhood experience Jane Hammond had, any articles she ever read, any nerve impulse that ever jumped over her synapses. It's in *that* brain. I think that is so cool. Temporally, it's the opposite of the Surrealist in the flea market because the association is preceding the found object, not emanating from it.

DD

Your early years on the move appear as patterns of flux. Had the context been a more stable one, the outcome, artistically speaking, might have been different.

JH

There's probably some real truth to that. I certainly have often noted that so many artists are from these shifting, improvised, broken and reformed backgrounds. You know, I joked to Judy Pfaff once, a woman who was moved around so much in her childhood, passed from relative to relative, that she was basically making these temporary houses, these places for herself, the little nomad.

DD

Identity mirrors circumstance, to survive maybe.

JH

Yes. I think that's mostly true, but I also think identity isn't necessarily an essentialist thing. I've done two paintings that are self-portraits as a group, in which they are all Jane, but there are nine or ten different people. There's a Jesus and

Santa Claus, Mickey Mouse and Superman, and a shaman and a knight. I think that one of the more interesting things about people is how we are all so different. As a child I always found it was interesting to go home with someone. You would often discover that they were very different with their parents than they were in school. Or you can have a girlfriend that you know really well, but you have no idea how she acts around men. And I really like that about people. I saw a man I know well the other day with his grandchild, and I realized that I have never before seen him with a little kid. We all have these different sides.

DD

You're receptive to multiple sources, situations, and identities that morph continually depending on time, place, and disposition. Let's get back to the photographs. What progression, what mental stops, brought you to the medium?

JH

The progression was that about a year ago I started making the three-dimensional paper scrapbooks, like *1000 Yen* or *Ship in a Bottle*. They are open books with all manner of images and media affixed to their pages. To backtrack a step, those unique scrapbooks came out of the print I made at ULAE in 2001, which is titled *Scrapbook*. For that print I made a rayogram of a frog skeleton, and for the subsequent unique scrapbooks I decided to try and incorporate some glossy photos, so there would be a real heterogeneity of media as well as images. To backtrack even further, for my ULAE print *The Wonderfulness of Downtown*, I took a series of photographs all over lower Manhattan, which I collaged onto the map. So anyhow, a year ago I

started buying photography on the Internet for the scrapbooks. I was searching for items in my lexicon: snowmen, ventriloquists, and bears. Right away it became very interesting. For example, in searching for bears I found four photos, all of them from Germany in the 1930s. Each photo shows a couple at the beach; the woman is in bathing attire and the man is in a full-body polar bear costume.

DD

Where did these images come from?

JH

One came from New Zealand and one from England and one from a dealer in Buffalo. You know, it's some kind of German trope I stumbled on. So then I started searching for more things and making artist books to hold my photo lexicon. I made books of acrobat photos and books of rabbit photos. I'm sure I've bought thousands of photos by now at yard sales and flea markets. Some of them only become interesting en masse. For example, there are lots of snow and snowman photos—because it's ephemeral. But many of the snowman photos are very small, and I'm thinking why would anyone photograph such a small snowman? But, you know, I'm from Connecticut. After I'd seen about twenty-five of these little snowmen, it dawns on me that this is Georgia. This is a freak snow in Alabama and this is the only snowman this kid is ever going to make.

Then I called my mother and begged her to let me borrow all our family photographs. I have to plead with her, but eventually I get three giant bags stuffed with loose photos. I spend four days looking at them and I spread them and my bought photographs all over the house in little constantly changing piles.

So what happened after that is, as I'm thinking about the photographs, I'm misremembering them.

DD

How so?

JH

I was cooking dinner one evening when it occurred to me that I was misremembering them and that *that* was the photography I wanted to make: the pictures in my head.

DD

Going through three bags of family photographs must have been an eye-opening and sobering experience.

JH

I told my mother that if you were an anthropologist you would think we spent all our time fishing, making snowmen, and observing magnolias.

DD

Who took the pictures?

JH

The women. So, out of the misremembering came this idea of trying to figure out how to make fictional photography. You know when I lecture about my painting I say that I make fictions out of facts. I start with found information, but it's not about appropriation or the death of originality, or a critique of the author. It's about making something out of something else. I make things out of other things. And as I've said before, there is an element of collaboration to this, or relishing other people's hands and voices and eyes. So now I have all of these other people's photographs in my house. Whole albums their own kids don't even want.

DD

But you're still looking at these through your own mental lens.

JH

I had this loose idea I was going to make fictional photographs by working with other photographers. After a bit, I started saying that I wasn't taking photographs: I was making photography. I had to research how to do what I wanted to do, and as soon as I began everyone suggested I make digital prints. But what was fascinating to me about the photography I was looking at out in the world were the assumptions I brought to it. If you take people off the street and interview them, they understand that painting is an imaginative act that whatever the painting depicts it didn't necessarily exist except in the painter's imagination. But if you show them a photograph, they presume this thing "happened"; they presume there was a photographer there to record it. And they presume that the event happened in some moment "before" the photograph was taken.

DD

The line between fact and fiction is easily blurred, especially with photography, especially now. What's your process? Manipulation is obviously a decisive factor.

JH

The process is one where first I get an idea in my head for a photograph. I might have gotten it from three or seven photographs I've collected or I might just get the idea and go out looking for the photographs. After I've made up my mind about the idea, I have the constituent elements scanned professionally on a high-resolution machine. Then I work with a very skilled retoucher fluent in Photoshop. We work side by side and separately in three or four sessions for each photograph.

DD

How does this collaboration play out?

JH

Sometimes I have a little drawing, sometimes a list of words and a diagram. It's things like I want this woman to be over here, but bigger and facing the other direction. I want her to have different hands. Now the hand has to cast a little shadow on the wall. Then when we add this other person, we have to work on the fact that they are each lit differently. Then when we have a kind of composite, we work on it like a painting. We darken the sky or beef up the shadow or emphasize the wires, or take others out. We put a frame around the door so the left side of the composition has more weight to it.

DD

You're thinking like a painter in the medium of photography.

JH

There are ways in which it is really like making a painting. I have one photo called *My Birth* that, needless to say, is named for the famous Frida Kahlo painting. In it, I'm a little clay child that a model-maker is sculpting and I'm holding a tiny boat. My father is below in a kind of nautical shirt and my mother has on a bathing suit. I wanted to play up the boat for those reasons but also to be a little sparkle of white against the dark body, like Tinkerbell in the cartoon.

DD

You're able to dodge?

JH

Yes, we can dodge in the Photoshop stage. And later, after I've converted the digital file into an LVT negative—which is where it reenters the world of photography—then as that negative is printed and becomes a silver gelatin print, it

can be dodged and affected greatly at that point also. The person doing the printing is very important; the printer is a magician.

DD

I wondered about the photos' diminutive size. Talk to me about that.

JH

I came up with that size intuitively. I wanted the photographs to have a very factual feel. Big photography feels more made up to me. I wanted the feeling I get from small black-and-white photography. Almost reportage.

DD

That sounds right. Their size implies a certain history and pedigree, too, that's intimate and poetic. The window you look through opens to another world.

JH

At this scale it feels a little more secret and a little more past. Remembered. Not as now.

DD

The photographs' size and seemingly seamless scenarios ally you with Surrealist photography. Not a bad precedent. And your gut is right; their size jibes perfectly with your intention.

JH

And the color issue is interesting. I make so many things with a lot of color, but I just really wanted the photographs to be black and white, even when some of the elements are color photographs.

DD

Speaking about size and color, how do these variables play out in another body of work—the "butterfly maps"—which are considerably larger and more colorful?

JH

The first butterfly map, which was *All Souls (Tabuk)*—the one centered on Iraq—came to me in a dream. There wasn't really any organic process that led up to it, as with the photos. It just came into my mind full blown. When I analyzed it, whether I wanted to do it or not and what it was about, what it meant—the scale and the color were right there front and center. I wanted it to feel like an old map with living butterflies on it. So the scale flowed from the natural size of the butterflies. Their color needed to be vibrant and as true as possible and the map needed to be old, roughed up and stained.

DD

The map's political content is hard to miss, at odds with a butterfly's beauty and vulnerability.

JH

Yes, I think the pieces contrast the brevity of the butterfly's life span with the duration of these ancient cities. You'll notice the maps deemphasize nationhood and emphasize the cities. And they also contrast the beauty and delicacy of the butterflies with the frisson of political conflict, or war, or danger.

DD

A sense of place seems to connect the "Butterfly Maps" with your earlier postcard collages. Talk to me about these.

JH

I went to Mexico one summer with a girlfriend and I went out to the drugstore and came back with a pile of Mexican comic books and a ton of postcards. I began cutting up the comics with manicure scissors and collaging the elements

into the postcards. I had people swimming in the water, all kinds of things. It was a very chaotic process because Mexico is hot in the summer and we constantly had the ceiling fan on—so all the little pieces were blowing around. In a couple of cases I used the same postcard twice and did two different things to it. My favorites are where I have created two different collages for two copies of the same postcard. It's similar to my "Soapstone" paintings, where I used the same room for several paintings.

DD

Variations on the card. I like the manicure scissors, and the collage process relates to what you've continued to do. Also, postcards are not only found objects; they're photo-based to boot.

JH

Yes, they are quite photographic. I hadn't thought of that before, but you are right. They are also about the same size as snapshots.

DD

Some of the Mexican postcards are funny. How does humor play out in the work? Is it one aspect of a complex personality?

JH

I suppose, yes, but it's not always there. The leaf piece I've recently made about the war in Iraq has not a scintilla of humor in it. Nor do the butterfly maps. I'm sure you would agree. But I have definitely made things that I think are funny and I've made them because they're funny. I've also made things I thought were funny but viewers take to be scary or angry. And the opposite is true, too.

DD

There's sometimes a vast divide between internalized humor and humor that bleeds into an image. Humor is a great way to deflect some-

thing that's troubling. Humor deflates seriousness and can be used to great advantage that way.

JH

In general, I would say that humor is held in low esteem in our culture. I've always felt that if someone told me that my work was funny it was a little dismissive. When you first start out, especially as a woman artist, you want to be taken "seriously," not "funnily." As I get older, I'm less inclined to worry about what someone else's canon is. I think that humor is an incredibly important, elemental human thing, which is also one whisker away from danger, anger, repression, you know?

DD

I wonder, too, if humor is age-determined. Leon [Golub] had a remarkable sense of humor, very existential, his own kind of gallows humor, and the soft underbelly to a lot of what he did. Even the most serious "Mercurian" paintings have humorous undertones.

JH

Recently I've learned that cartoons in the New Yorker are often drawn and written by two different people. So the humor isn't just coming from one person's "sense of humor" being perfectly expressed, but from the imperfect alignment of two differing sensibilities. That friction is part of their collaboration.

DD

Sounds like an absurd encounter between two predisposed minds.

JH

Yes, if you think of it that way, it is basically tension. Then it is a classic Shakespearean idea of

what makes a great work of art. So then I can relax about it, if I go that route.

DD

Humor offers relief; look at stand-up comedy. The audience relaxes in the process because they're in on the joke; it makes them feel good.

JH

And because the comedian is bearing their anger for them. The comedian is basically saying to the audience, "Here, I'll take your anger and hold it for an hour."

DD

There are many analogs to the way you think. You mentioned cooking, surely an art of mixing and recombining.

JH

Yes, cooking is an interest of mine. And although I think of it as a hobby, there are things that I have learned about art making from cooking. I remember an interview Julia Child gave years ago. She described having dinner at a French woman's house in the country. The main course was lamb, and Julia described the woman pouring some of the juices from the roasting pan into the salad dressing. Her explanation was that although a meal should have variety and contrast, it should also be possessed of a certain subliminal continuity.

DD

I was thinking about your musical analogy, hip-hop and sampling. And of course there's jazz, an art of brilliant improvisation. You're well attuned to working this way.

JH

I'm a mixer, not just in terms of images but also in terms of methodologies. I use the found and the felt, the improvisational and the strategic. One of the things I admire most about John

Ashbery's work is the seamless way in which he fuses overheard, almost lapidary, pieces of language with his own personal feelings—whether silly, melancholic, self-mocking—whatever, with larger supra-personal ideas. It's a bricolage of all those things and the reader barely knows where one ends and the other begins. The constant switching and layering of voice is both playful and a profound statement on the complexity of all of our inner lives. And our outer lives, too, for that matter.

DD

I'd be hard pressed to summarize all that we've talked about. That said, a few things do stand out: that the work in general abounds with visual information, the product of your creative curiosity at any given moment; and that each painting and work on paper, once conceived, becomes polysemous, something else, above and beyond who you are.

JH

You know, in general, I am always more engaged in extending than summarizing. Your point about works becoming something "above and beyond" is the heart of the matter. When things go well, there is more there than I even know, maybe than I will ever know. That will be the interesting part for me.