

Joshua Neustein

A Conversation.

By Catherine Craft / Nasher Sculpture Center

Working in the U.S. and Israel for more than four decades, Joshua Neustein (b. 1940) makes art that traverses conventional boundaries between artistic media, often with the effect of questioning and challenging the divisions, borders, and distinctions that shape our social, political, and personal lives. His works on and with paper in particular have contributed significantly to redefinitions of drawing in contemporary art. A Guggenheim fellow, Joshua Neustein represented Israel in the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, and his work is included in numerous museum and private collections. In 2012, in addition to an upcoming retrospective at the Israel Museum, he will have a solo show at Untitled Gallery, New York and will be featured in "Ends of the Earth: Art of the Land to 1974," a major historical survey of land art organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Catherine Craft, Adjunct Assistant Curator for Research and Exhibitions, spoke with Joshua Neustein in New York at his SoHo studio.

I think drawing today is the most exciting of the practices in art. - Joshua Neustein

CC: Joshua, when I visited you two months ago, you were in the process of working on a retrospective for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. How's that going?

JN: Let's call it an introspective.

CC: All right, an introspective. Who's curating that show?

JN: My curator is the Chief Curator of Drawing at the Israel Museum, Meria Perry-Lehmann. This is her last exhibition. Her first exhibition, in 1974, was with me. So it's a nice closure for her.

CC: What was that first exhibition?

JN: It was called *Beyond Drawing*, and it was a group show which I suppose was initiated by me. Or rather, at the time by the Chief Curator of Drawing at the Israel Museum, Yona Fischer, the éminence grise of Israeli art. And [Meria] was a young curator in her twenties, and he said to her, "Why don't you come with me to Neustein's studio? It's a good beginning for you because he'll be helpful." In those days I was considered helpful.

CC: You still are, that's my impression.

JN: Well, you know, there are two kinds of artists: those who create mythologies about themselves and so therefore are mysterious. And those who answer questions and dissolve mystique. Explanations always dissolve mystique.

CC: And which are you?

JN: I don't believe in mystique. I don't believe in artists creating mystiques. I think it's counter-productive, it's consummately promotional. The best example I can think of at the moment is Andy Warhol, who always answered all questions in such a mysterious way. What made Andy Warhol's mystique modern is that he was sort of saying, "I don't believe in mystique, everything is just bland and off-hand," but he never explained anything. An interviewer would ask him what he was painting on and he would turn to his assistant and say, "What are we painting?" Then he would ask, "Why am I painting this?" – as if he had no will of his own. All of these were mystifications. Mystifications go contrary to my conception of art.



Joshua Neustein and Catherine Craft with (and on) Joshua Neustein, *Star Gate as Alberti's Window*, 2011, 2 pieces of polyurethane with acrylic paint.

CC: Early on, were there other artists that you saw as role models for that alternative type of artist?

JN: I think my most influential godfather was a historian, not an artist. I took every course he ever gave at City College. His name was Hans Kohn, and his specialty was the history of nationalism. Hans Kohn was enormously influential on my thinking in art.

CC: In what way?

JN: In his philosophical ideas, he being Central European, originally of Czech origin, and then associated with Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt. If you look at their history of totalitarianism, you see that it's not a straightforward history at all. This whole notion of labels is very misleading. Hans Kohn was the first person I met who had an encyclopedic view of the world: everything fit together. He said all movements – psychoanalysis, Marxism, capitalism – have several stages. In the beginning all these movements are very constructive.

Take Abstract Expressionism. In the beginning of that movement, it was tremendously constructive. It explored new possibilities. It opened up new ways of doing art, and perhaps even more important, it opened up new ways of thinking about art. What great movements do, is they change the language that describes it. And that opens doors for artists but also for you as a curator. What do we mean when we say drawing?

CC: It does seem that drawing has become this practice that moves between other disciplines and media that tend to exclude each other.

JN: And energizes them. I am a total advocate of drawing. I think drawing today is the most exciting of the practices in art. More than sculpture, more than video. The only one that perhaps is as exciting or more, or at least was until recently, is modern dance, because of [John] Cage, and because of [Merce] Cunningham, and because of [Robert] Rauschenberg and Robert Morris... I unfortunately was in Israel when all this was going on here, but I was making my own explorations. On the one hand I functioned in a kind of a vacuum; on the other hand, it gave me the chance to do my own thing.

CC: It's interesting because the life you led early on as an artist, being in two places – Israel and New York – that's much less unusual today.

JN: And there's less prejudice against people living outside the so-called center. I think museum curators today do look at art developing in other places. Whereas before they looked at New York, Paris, London, but that was it. Maybe Berlin, but that was already a reach.

CC: So it sounds like with this exhibition at the Israel Museum and also generally, you're seeking an expanded definition of drawing.

JN: It is going to be an expanded definition. I'm going to have 72 works in that show. There will be 5 videos as drawing, including one you saw, *Making and Erasing*. In that video, I sometimes make and erase a scribble, other times I make and erase the alphabet, then I make and erase sentences, then I make and erase iconic symbols like the swastika, the dollar sign, the Star of David, the cross.

CC: Do you still make erased drawings?

JN: I make erased drawings but I don't erase these fancy symbols. But I will – I have a few left from making the film that I didn't throw away. You know artists collect everything, like ants. In other words, I don't edit myself historically. Some things I just lose interest in. But the carbon copy drawings are different.

CC: Those are the first works I saw by you. They're made from carbon sets, those sheets of blank paper interspersed with carbon paper, and you cut, fold, tear, and mark the different layers. You've been making these for a long time.

JN: Yes, since 1968.

CC: When you started making them, carbon paper was still being used to make copies of documents. And all this time that you've been making these drawings, what that paper is has changed – it's now obsolete. Has that changed the way you thought about what you're doing with the carbon sets?

JN: Too late. Too late. The nostalgia aspect of it I keep hearing from other people. But of course I've been working with



Joshua Neustein, *Moisture II*, carbon set, (detail) 2005

BELOW: Joshua Neustein, *Erased Two Squares*, paper with graphite and glassine envelope containing eraser rubbings, 1971/72



them for such a long time. I have these boxes of them. I did one this week. It's an ongoing practice. Something comes up. There may be a statement by Donald Judd, by Ad Reinhardt, or somebody in Israel. Then I'll make a carbon copy drawing that addresses that statement.

CC: You make a drawing that responds to a statement, in language.

JN: Language is more of a driving engine in my work than meaning. And that goes back to Hans Kohn. He says that when a newspaper describes somebody, you always see an adjective that describes that person. Take a newspaper article and read the adjectives, the participles that are attached. Even the physical description of, say, politicians is very biased, it's triggered, it's loaded.

CC: It's already telling you what you need to think.

JN: Right. So when I describe a drawing, the language is very important. I'll make a scribble on a piece of paper, I'll erase a square, and I'll write at the bottom "Erased Square." There's a contradiction between the language and the act and what you see. "Erased Square" implies some kind of obliteration of the square when in fact the square was created by the erasure. And then I take the rubbings from the erasure, and put them into a glassine envelope, so it puts the erased square into an envelope, which is then attached to the drawing.

CC: The scribble is still there, in the shreds of the eraser.

JN: My premise is that I don't change anything, I just move it or shift it around.

CC: One of the things we've touched on in our earlier emails and conversations is that you do seem very concerned with not taking things away, and the erased drawings bring that to mind. There is to me a sort of ethics in that. You've used the ashes from the cigars that you smoke in your ash pieces. In the magnetic field drawings, you used metal filings gathered from the shavings of someone sharpening blades. Can you talk a little bit about that?

JN: My salvaging, or recycling. There is something to that. But when I initially did these things, I had no sense necessarily of what later came on as a thought, as a rationale. Recently I was thinking, perhaps the process of salvaging or recycling something is not unlike - and maybe that's just my wanting to attach myself to the history of art - the way Brancusi added bases to his sculptures. For the artist who functions in a studio, for me, the quest is for what's real, not what's the truth - I don't have that - but what's real. When Brancusi sculpted, I assume, I would imagine, that for him the base was more real than the sculpture. When it's covered with the patina of the sculpture to some extent, still visible as a base, but with material on it and adhering to it, then he would need another base, because the base is supposedly not part of the sculpture. A base is like a prelude or an introduction, or, in

writing, like a foreword. The foreword is part of the book but not necessarily; it has a relationship, a surrogate relationship, a predicated relationship or collateral relationship. Each of these adjectives I'm using don't mean the same thing; they indicate a different relationship between the "work of art" and the materials and objects related to its making in the studio.

CC: So sometimes do these things become more real to you, more compelling, than what was originally meant to be the artwork?

JN: Right. For example, this is going to be one of the drawings in the show.

CC: This sheet of plastic taped to the wall?

JN: It's a drawing, but it's not a work on paper, it's on polyurethane. And the sheet of polyurethane you're standing on, that will also be part of it.

CC: They'll be installed together? That's great.

JN: Because this [on the floor] is what this [on the wall] was. I "made" it when I was making these other drawings.

CC: The ones on paper here on the table, with paint sprayed on them? Was the sheet of polyurethane under them while you were spraying them?

JN: Yes.

CC: So it's a dropcloth, in essence.

JN: Yes. And that dropcloth, I found more compelling, more real than the drawings made on top of it. Those drawings on paper remain inside the fictional frame of our minds, in our practice, of our history.

CC: Like "a picture," in that traditional sense.

JN: Like a picture, yes. And this was real - more real than that, as I imagine Brancusi's bases were more real to him than his sculpture. You know, Brancusi's involvement with the base, with the bases driving him nuts, was the best thing that happened to him!

CC: Scholars and critics writing about your work sometimes discuss its relationship to painting. But it occurs to me that your work touches upon sculpture too, especially with your talk now about Brancusi, and the way you treat your materials.

JN: Absolutely. My works have a front and back. But they have not only front and back, their front is related to their back. It's not like I make the back as if it was another face. The back is the back of the work.

CC: But just as real as the rest of it.

JN: Perhaps more real than the front. When we stand here, in front of, and on, the dropcloths, we must keep in mind that

this is a drawing that you're standing on and walking around, and that this [on the wall] was down here, and it's mobile, which means, in your mind it's mobile too.

CC: Can you switch them? Can the dropcloth on the floor be on the wall, and vice versa?

JN: Absolutely.

CC: And will visitors to your show be walking on them?

JN: If they dare (laughs). Usually they will dare. The break between the two dropcloths is my negotiating with the viewer. The dropcloth could just continue from the wall and across the floor. Will you be less likely to walk on it if it continues? Or more likely? I want you to. If I separate it, make it two pieces with a gap between, I think you're more likely to walk on it. That break gives you entrée.

CC: The way you're moving the dropcloths and manipulating them reminds me of the way you work with paper. Somehow for me those acts are associated with paper.

JN: Yes. Today drawing is closer to sculpture than painting.

CC: When you fold or tear a piece of paper, you're bringing it up from a planar dimension, into space, into the third dimension, even if you flatten it back out again.

JN: Which somehow painting is too heavy to do. There's too much material on that plane to be able to manipulate it, to be able to lift it. Such that when the artist manipulates it, he needs to bring along the viewer. So, for example, it's important for you to know that this was a drop cloth. I think maybe having more on the floor and less on the wall will be more interactive in a sense. Up there are some footprints. This all doesn't happen intentionally. I try to avoid footprints. But it's there. This is not designed. It's a product. Almost an index, like the design the beach has when people walk on it.

CC: But now that you've done that one by accident, so to speak -

JN: - it's difficult -

CC: - it's difficult to do again. (laughter)

JN: Absolutely right. The first time you do it, it's originary: Wow! This is great! Then you go through a period of being so self-conscious, that it becomes frustrating and the work doesn't look right. After a while, you forget that you're going to use this as the final product. Then you no longer care.

CC: It becomes just something else in the studio.

JN: Then it comes back. This is fairly recent, but there was a period between the first one that I thought was acceptable, and then came a series of drop cloths that looked designed, looked like I'd made them. They have to make themselves. I just have to walk around and live on this floor and not think about it. When that happens, I'm back in business. And that's what happened. I usually throw them out, but I kept these drop cloths. I have a whole mess of them right here. I'll keep them, and show them off and on.

CC: One thing that strikes me about the dropcloths, also about the carbon papers, and your involvement with paper generally, is that there is a certain democratic sense to these materials. Anybody has access to them, anybody can use them.

JN: Absolutely...Right on.

CC: And they're also portable. You don't really need a studio, or a special space to make them.

JN: It's totally portable. Also, if anything happens to it, it doesn't matter. I once had a guy who wanted to buy my first carbon piece and pay me for my last carbon piece. My last carbon piece? Who knows? When and where is it written that he will live longer than I will? [laughs] But I couldn't tell him what my first carbon piece was - very likely it was discarded. I could however commit to selling my last carbon piece, given that they can be certain that that's my last carbon piece. An intriguing idea.

CC: Well, hopefully that won't be for a very long time! Thank you so much, Joshua.

JN: Very mutual. I've had a wonderful time.



Nasher Sculpture Center Welcomes New Adjunct Assistant Curator Catherine A. Craft

The Nasher Sculpture Center recently welcomed Catherine A. Craft, Ph.D. as adjunct assistant curator for research and exhibitions. Dr. Craft's position is generously funded by a two-year grant from the Texas Fund for Curatorial Research at the University of Texas at Dallas where, in addition to her duties at the Nasher Sculpture Center, she will also teach a course each year. Dr. Craft is a respected art historian, curator, lecturer, and writer specializing in the twentieth-century art. She joins the Nasher from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where she was a senior

