



## Free Thinkers Issue #7: Joseph Hart

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Way back in 2007, Sheila Heti interviewed critic Dave Hickey for *The Believer*. Among other things, she asked him why he thought people were interested in art. The big question. Without missing a beat, he replied, “I think they want to touch the source of something, you know? It doesn’t make people better. It doesn’t make them happier. It doesn’t make them smarter, and you can’t teach people to do it or like it. So who knows?”

When I call Joseph Hart up at his studio on a sunny summer’s morning, I think of the generosity of Hickey’s claim. Like Hickey, Hart speaks openly and with great character. Raised in rural New Hampshire and now living in Brooklyn, he carries himself with the ease of one accustomed to a marked duality of living, humble at the right moments and sharply decisive when it counts.

It’s an attitude that is reflected well in his artistic practice. The majority of his works are made up of paper — incised, scrawled-on, or painted paper, sparsely populated with literal litter, hardware swatches, chance encounters. There is bravura in their levity: each work is characterized by a boldness of line knit tenuously around a frailer structure of geometric incisions. Sometimes great darkneses intrude on the otherwise dirty-white field. Other times, there’s colour: a startling blush of red, a skinny blue angled to dash away. And there’s an energy

that is undeniable: a shivering, frantic realness that seems barely contained by the edge, or the frame.

Since I can't see it, Hart tells me about his studio — a continuation of his work, really, with finger-smudged walls marked up with pencil grids and oil crayon, emptied of noise and wi-fi — and how he works all across it, moving around like a prairie fire. He works on the walls, works on the floor, works on the tables set out by the bright windows. Inevitably, papers will shift and reshuffle. Something, maybe, will drift in through the window to alight on a page. To Hart, these changes are all welcome. They're the introduction of chance to a structural game.

“One of the things that I wrestle with is control,” Hart says, his voice cross-hatched and warmed by speaker-phone static. “I try to cede control, because when I over-orchestrate things, my work gets tight. It gets a little too thought-over. That's a feeling that I'm trying to avoid in the work. I like for things to feel more free and honest and truthful. To coalesce in a way that makes it feel relaxed.” But it's not all free and easy. Hart also edits ruthlessly, returning to pieces after letting them sit out of sight for weeks at a time to redact and rework until it “starts to feel right.”

“Maybe that's just a very American thing: Give me a second chance, I'll do it better next time!” he jokes. “But that's very much connected to how I tend to work. I need to go back into my work until it starts to capture a certain visual tension or harmony that is important to me. It's rare that we can hit that on the first try.”

“I've been sort of culturally irresponsible,” he admits, recently preferring to spend rare days off gilding across the glass-smooth surfaces of the lakes of his hometown than negotiating the hot press of Manhattan's crowds. Nature, in all its complexity, both calms and interests him. A professor at the City College of New York, Hart tells me about a lecture that he likes to give new students that traces our love for alluring objects back to our experience of the natural world.

“The grid on a pinecone or the pattern in honeycomb or the interesting contour of a mountain against the horizon, especially at a sunset when things are super sharp: all these things, we're hardwired to feel something when we see them, and that goes back to when we were developing as a species,” he says. “You can ride that wave deeper into why we like what we like.”

It's a sentiment echoed in that same interview with David Hickey, who put it more crassly than Hart does. "I think you want to learn about art because you had an experience of some sort—a totally nonredemptive but vaguely exciting experience, like brushing up against a girl with big boobs in the subway," said Hickey to Heti. "It's about that level of intensity. So you want to find out more about it since its sources are so mysterious, and these sources reside in you as well as in the object."

I mention this anecdote to Hart, who likes Hickey enough to have read two books by him, and he takes to it gladly. Hart, you see, leaps at his work out of instinct. The aim of all this working and re-working is to move beyond consideration and into a sort of fluency; one that speaks to those impulses that edge beyond language. An obvious influence is Cy Twombly, the late painter whose commitment to moving action outside of purpose cemented him into the canon of 20th century art. Twombly and Hart share not just the delight of tiny detail and the illusion of effortlessness in labour, but also, more largely, an experiential way of art-making that, as Mr. Twombly once said, creates a picture that is "the sensation of its own realization." And when Hart describes Twombly's "reliance on and trust in gesture, mix of drawing and painting, sense of action and instinct, and allowing the mark to be enough," he could very well be describing the strengths of his own body of work.

Alongside the works on paper come newer paintings on canvas, which Hart began showing only recently in spite of having made many of them over the past six years. In opposition to the drawings, the paintings are all commitment. Striking marks and slashes channel the energy of the works on paper into something more pointed, and with heft. One feels the length of his arm go into it, the satisfaction of an athletic follow-through in every extended gesture.

"Skid marks on the road have been interesting lately," he says, evoking his paper-wide swerves of oily black. "And this past winter, I looked a lot at snowbanks full of litter. New York has a disgusting amount of litter everywhere, but once that litter starts collecting on a white ground, it starts reminding me of what I'm making in the studio: this odd collection of little bits and pieces."

An odd collection, indeed. When Hart doesn't abandon titling altogether, which is frequently, he presses words together that are reminiscent, in rhythm and resonance, of the phonaesthetic "cellar door". *Dread Blush*, *Odd Loom*, *Kiss Idioms*. They're collaged, like his drawings, from

materials found in his studio: phrases that occur to him as he works get scrawled onto the walls, to be lifted into new juxtaposition later. Most of his titles are chosen because of their evocative ambiguity. It's only *Dread Blush* that he clues me into, thinking about the opposite of blushing out of warmth or pleasure — the white-knuckling or turning “white as a sheet” of total fear or terror.

Though I should, I don't ask Hart about his most recently terrifying memory. I do, however, ask him for a good one. He describes taking his young daughter up to one of those chilled, glacial lakes, and the material awe that she experienced as she moved her fingers, for the first time, through the water. A sunlit wonder glints off the surface of his voice. There's a lot in there, like the nascent discovery of where surface ends and abyss begins, or the breaking of one plane to enter another. But there's also just the plain thrill of the kid. So when Hart talks about art, and he uses words as whole and expansive as “free” and “honest” and “truthful”, we believe him. We're tapped back into thinking about those sources that, through our immutable objects, we're always trying to touch.