



The following interview was conducted in late summer 2007 between Tim Thayer and Bill Mead.

THAYER: Do you see the red paintings (I guess this makes a question within a question - do you prefer to call the current series "the red paintings"?) in a figure ground relationship, that is, do the elements and shapes not in red act as separate objects on top of the red surface?

MEAD: The red paintings could be described as figure ground but the shapes are not necessarily on the surface. The red paintings come about through a process of layering the paint. I start with a surface painted red and then paint shapes and lines onto it. Once dry I cover the entire surface again with red paint, usually cadmium red deep that has been thinned with medium. The painted shapes are now submerged beneath the red paint but they are not invisible. Some of the shapes I bring back to the surface by re-painting them. Some I leave submerged. I'll also paint in some new shapes. Once dry I'll cover everything in red again. This process repeats until the painting is complete. The red paint becomes a kind of atmosphere and the painted shapes float in the atmosphere both near the surface or several layers beneath it.

THAYER: Do you often finish a work only to look at it later and decide it's not done and keep working? Or do you more often know when you have it "right"?

MEAD: In the studio the paintings will eventually reach a point where they feel finished or close to it. At that point the painting enters its "grace period" and will usually be moved from the studio into the house where we can all live with it all day, everyday. If after a week or more I feel the painting still holds up, I can call it finished. If the painting begins to feel weak or tiresome it goes back out into the studio for more attention. Often I know within just a few days, sometimes hours after hanging it in the house if a painting is strong enough to release into the world.

THAYER: How do you like to work- both in terms of hours (when, how long)- as well as how many paintings at one time?

MEAD: I tend to work in series so I will usually have a dozen or more similar paintings going at once. I don't necessarily work on every painting everyday, sometimes I focus on just one or two, but I will keep the rest in view and ready in case I decide to turn my attention to them. I also keep a separate group of paintings going that have nothing to do with the current series. They serve as a fallback if I reach an impasse with the current group and need a change of direction. The fallbacks will eventually become the center of my focus and I'll begin another group of fallback paintings to take their place.

THAYER: How does the current series relate to past work? What's new, what's continual?

MEAD: As I work on a painting I will often try out new ideas or elements in an effort to distinguish it from the paintings that have preceded it. It could be a shape, color, or some other aspect. It could be subtle or pronounced. The outcome is not always successful but this approach helps keep the painting process more challenging and prevents it from becoming rote. It also serves as a way for the paintings to gradually evolve from series to series. In this way, the newest paintings are a direct outgrowth of earlier paintings even though they may bear little resemblance.

THAYER: Have you worked in different styles or mediums in the past, or have you worked in non-representational painting for a long time (I'd even put the "tea pot" paintings in the non-representational category)?

MEAD: I've worked in all the usual painting mediums but have favored casein over the last decade or so.

I've always considered my work to be abstract although not always non-representational. Things like houses and teapots have frequently found their way into my paintings. Lately, though, I've been dealing with more pure abstraction avoiding references to tangible things. One could argue that all painting is abstract.

THAYER: What are the influences on your work from your location - specifically Woodstock, and the Catskills in general?

MEAD: If anything, living here has more of an effect on my state of mind, which in turn has a bearing on my work. I don't consciously draw from nature for inspiration, but I do enjoy being surrounded by the natural beauty of the Catskills. My years here have been the most productive years I've had as a painter. I think my surroundings and the pace of life up here have much to do with that.

THAYER: When you were younger - either student days or even as a child - who were some of the painters/artists you admired?

MEAD: Having grown up in a small, conservative city in Virginia, my exposure to the contemporary arts was limited. I fell under the sway of the usual influences such as Picasso and Cezanne. I also liked Saul Steinberg. I once received postcards from a Jackson Pollack exhibit in New York and that got me interested in the Abstract Expressionists. Once in college at Virginia Commonwealth University my eyes were opened to painters like Jasper Johns, Terry Winters, and Phillip Guston - all of whom I still admire greatly.

THAYER: The paintings in the current show are casein on panel; what is casein? How long have you been working in it?

MEAD: Casein is a milk-based, water soluble paint that dries quickly and holds color well. It has its limitations but it is a very decent substitute for oil, especially when working on a small scale. I began using casein while at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown in 1990. In my smallish studio there, I was working on many small paintings at once and became frustrated with the slow drying time of the oil paints and concerned about the solvents and fumes. I was drawn to casein because it was a relatively clean medium to work with and its colors were very rich. Also, it is workable even after it dries and it can be sanded, scraped, and otherwise abused more readily than most other paint mediums. This is a feature I like very much.

THAYER: What do you like to do beyond painting and art?

MEAD: These days I'm all wrapped up in a search for a piece of land where we can build a house that suits us. I want to build the house myself. I've become very interested in the technologies, both old and new, that would allow us to have a house that is comfortable and efficient in terms of space and energy use. Researching this stuff has been my latest hobby. The idea of actually building a house is both exciting and daunting.

THAYER: Thanks so much for taking the time for the interview. I realize we've just lightly touched on a range of topics. Hopefully we can delve deeper into them later, but I think this is a good introduction to your work and thinking.