

*Previously unpublished interview with Mark Godfrey at MOCA in LA, California, April 29, 2004*

Mark Godfrey: Let's begin by talking about *White Star*, the earliest of your works exhibited here.

Jo Baer: It was made in New York in 1961. Hard-edge work was very much on the horizon. I had been through Abstract Expressionism and was looking for something else to do.

MG: Had you moved recently from L.A.?

JB: Yes, I came to New York in 1960.

MG: One of the subjects addressed in this show is the difference or possible connections between the East and West Coasts during that time. Did you feel you were moving to a more serious milieu when you came to New York?

JB: Yes, absolutely.

MG: What was your connection with the art scene in California? Had you seen shows at the Ferus Gallery?

JB: Oh yes, I knew the Ferus group. The story about me riding my Harley Davidson through the Ferus Gallery in pearls and a leather jacket isn't true, though--unfortunately. I found them to be a tight group, which is putting it politely.

MG: What were you making in L.A.?

JB: Essentially, I was learning to paint. Some of the works that I made at that time still exist. I called them *Fake de Kooning*, *Fake Still*, *Fake Rothko* and so on.

MG: While you were in L.A. did you see any of the work that's included in this show?

JB: I saw Johns and Gorky and a big show that came from the Whitney.

MG: Johns was shown here before you got to New York?

JB: No, a collector here owned some of his Targets. I saw the Flags for the first time in New York. I was very taken with Johns.

MG: *White Star* presumably has links to your encounter with Johns's work.

JB: I never thought of it that way, but it's an interesting idea.

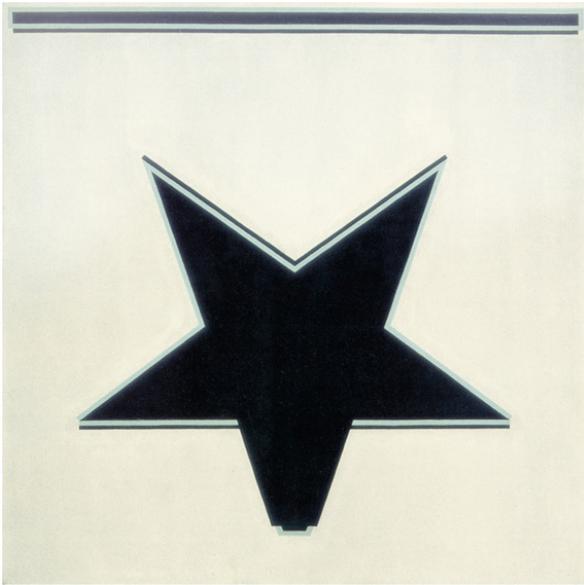


Fig. 1. *White Star*, 1960-1961, oil on canvas, 183 x 183 cm.

MG: There's something about *White Star* that could be considered proto-Pop.

JB: I was living with one of the people who invented Pop Art. My husband was John Wesley.

MG: Did you share a studio?

JB: Yes, we stole from each other. It was fascinating to watch how he used a brush. He liked a lot of the colors I made, so we sort of messed around that way.

I did a lot of other things which I considered my Pop Art, like the graph paper drawings and paintings. I've never had any problem with working with images.

MG: The next work in this show, *Untitled 62*, is part of the series that became known as the "Koreans." It marks a major transition -- the central motif has been emptied out. What was involved in that move from *White Star* to the "Koreans?"

JB: I knew that this was the right way to go. I wanted to make paintings, not pictures. And so I took the star out of the middle and made a painting.

MG: Did your certainty that it was the right thing to do come from your knowledge of what else was going on at the time, or did it come from within the work itself?

JB: Living in New York, one always knew what was going on. I had done these paintings, and then I met Judd in '62 or '63. Through Judd I met Flavin, and then Sol [LeWitt] and Eva [Hesse].

MG: It's interesting that you discovered these people before you were aware of the emergence of Minimal Art but after you had begun to make it.

JB: Yes, we all made it separately. Just like Jack [Wesley] and Lichtenstein and Andy [Warhol] were doing Pop at the same time. Something's in the air and then somebody comes along and gathers you up and says, "Let's do a show." If I remember correctly, Virginia Dwan's "10" show was actually Ad Reinhardt's idea. Reinhardt noticed something and wished to be part of it, so he gathered us together and included himself and Agnes [Martin], who were older.

MG: That was in 1966, after Dan Flavin had organized the “Eleven Artists” show at the Kaymar Gallery.

JB: Flavin’s show was in 1964. It included a number of us along with several different kinds of artists. It was actually reviewed in *The New York Times*, so it wasn’t hidden. This emerging Minimalism was not an underground thing at all. It was in the air.

MG: Were the paintings from the “Korean” series shown at the time, or only later?

JB: They were not shown until 1971. Ivan Karp, who was working for Castelli when he saw them in ’63 said that they were very American and very aggressive and that he couldn’t believe anybody in the world would buy one of them. I was sort of stuck. There were 16 of them and they took up a lot of room, so I had to rent storage space for them. I got sick of paying rent on them and said, “I think I’m going to destroy them, to hell with it.” That’s when Flavin offered to take them in. Someone else ended up storing them, though, for money.

MG: The motifs at the top of the “Koreans” differ, but otherwise the paintings in the series are similar. Did you derive these from drawings?

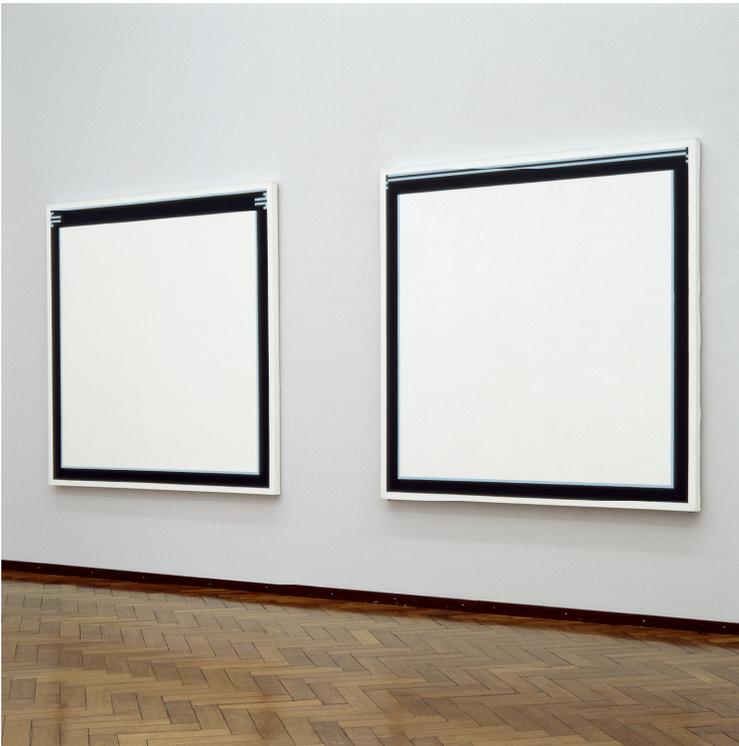


Fig. 2. Right: *Korean*, 1963, oil on canvas, 72.1 x 72.1 cm. Left: *Korean*, 1962, oil on canvas, 72.1 x 72.1 cm

JB: From six-inch drawings—gouaches—a number of which were borrowed for a show in Munich, and never given back.

MG: The white paint on *White Star* looks very different to the white paint on the “Korean” in the show.

JB: The Koreans were painted over. Over time, oil tends to darken white paint. *White Star* was not repainted, and you can see what happened.

MG: When were the “Koreans” repainted?

JB: As soon as I found a way of keeping white paint white. I worked it out with the restorer at the Guggenheim, Oren Reilly. We used an acrylic resin which was compatible with oil and isolated every third layer with varnish. We did samples and aged them for two hundred years and things like that.

MG: Did they turn out the way you wanted?

JB: Yes, I just wanted nice white paint.

MG: Even though the lines seem very straight, up close it's clear that they were hand made. Was it important to you to convey that fact?

JB: I don't care about the hand in the sense of 'Oh wow, it's hand-made.' But a mechanical line is dead. A hand-painted line is kept alive by light. Light jumps off every wiggle, every slight irregularity.

MG: You mentioned that by removing the image of the star you were able to create not a picture, but a painting. But there's still some residual sense of referentiality in these paintings--to columns, for instance.

JB: Yes, I like that.

MG: Did you see the move from the "Koreans" to these very spare paintings as a further reduction or as a way to expand? All references to columns or whatever those little shapes in the top corners might suggest are gone.

JB: Well, no one would show the ones that had little things in the corners, so I moved to what I consider the more ordinary or less original compositions because I really wanted to show work. On the other hand I found it very interesting to work with just the color. That's when I really began to concentrate on the notion of light. I discovered what was happening with the color lines, and I developed a different referential system. That's also when I started making the gray paintings.

MG: One of the surprising things about these reductive paintings is that although they look simpler than the "Koreans," the visual experience they offer is more complicated. The color changes as you walk from side to side. When you stand in front of it, it zigs around the painting.

JB: Yes, I found this all very interesting, so it was okay to let go of the other kind of reference system.

MG: You've described the paintings as sumptuous. Was that sumptuousness picked up by other people at the time?

JB: My peers didn't like the idea that I was using color at all. They thought I should stick to black and white. Then there were others like Clem Greenberg who thought I should paint it pink.

MG: Did you meet Greenberg?

JB: Yes. After I wrote a letter to *Artforum* attacking the sculptors, he invited me to his house. He said, 'Hello, here's a martini,' and then, 'Why don't you paint it pink? Why are you always painting it white or gray?' I answered, 'Because Noland paints it pink, or Olitski paints it pink. You don't need me to paint it pink.'

MG: Your letter to *Artforum* was published in the September 1967. It's one of the only instances of a painter in the mid-'60s defending their work against Judd's and Morris' charges against painting. At what point did you sense an emerging hostility? Was it in conversation, or was it when you read Judd's "Specific Objects"<sup>1</sup> and Morris' "Notes on Sculpture"<sup>2</sup>?

JB: Their writings offended me. After all, all of this sculpture had come out of painting. The thinking was done in painting. These sculptors had been crummy painters--they were smart to go to sculpture. People were saying 'Painting's dead,' 'Painting can't be radical,' and so on. It was very annoying. Finally I got fed up and decided to write a polemical piece about it.

MG: It's a very carefully written document. Why didn't you publish it as an article?

JB: I didn't want to be paid for it. This was just something I wanted to say. Even as it was, my dealer said, 'Who the hell do you think you are, attacking Bob Morris?' People were very upset with me.

MG: Did you feel you were writing a polemic on behalf of your own work, or was it also on behalf on the painters around you?

JB: I didn't see any painters around me doing anything close to what I was doing, so of course my main concern was my own work, but I would have to say that I was defending painting. I adore painting, and I felt it wrong that these sculptors were playing fast and loose for their own ends.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook*, 8 (1965). Reprinted in Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975 (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York University Press, 1975) 181-89 and in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer, (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2000) 207-10.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part I," *Artforum*, 4:6 (February 1966) reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968) 222-28 and in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer. "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," *Artforum*, 5:2 (October 1966); reprinted with Part I in *Minimalism*.

MG: Do you know how Brice Marden or Robert Mangold responded to your letter?

JB: I have no idea. The ones who congratulated me were the English artists, like John Walker and John Hoyland. Then all kinds of strange, bad painters came crawling out, saying what a hero I was, which I found really awkward.

MG: Did you feel that the art world was chauvinist at that moment? Was this letter more threatening because it came from a woman?

JB: I just saw that these sculptors were running roughshod all over the place. I didn't think I was being discriminated against for being female, although in fact I was. I wasn't particularly sensitive to it, although the women around me, like Lucy Lippard, were very concerned with feminism in the arts.

MG: Robert Smithson and Mel Bochner weren't much involved in the debate between painting and sculpture. Bochner was interested in seriality and the way in which some of your works might be placed in a number of different orders. And Smithson wrote a text<sup>3</sup> in which he compared your paintings to the Bellman's map in Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*. He talked about your paintings as blank maps. What was your association with Smithson and Bochner and Dan Graham?

JB: I knew all three of them quite well. I liked to argue with Smithson. I liked his writing far better than his art. He was particularly interested in mirrors and would tell me that mirror images are identical. I would argue that they're not. This used to annoy him greatly. I have a background in the sciences, and Smithson was a very literary person. He really did not like being corrected this way. I also used to argue with Sol [LeWitt].

MG: About what?

JB: He would say that it didn't matter what his work looked like as long as it followed the plan. I would laugh at him and say, 'When you make the plan, you know what the work is going to look like. You care about that.' He would deny this. He was particularly vehement in insisting that the visual thing was not important. That was just bullshit.

MG: Some or maybe all of your own paintings were made from maquettes. Were there occasions when a painting didn't work out for you and you destroyed it?

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," *Art International* (March 1968) 67-78; reprinted in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York University Press, 1979); *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996); and *Minimalism*.

JB: Or I changed it. It can be interesting when something doesn't work. You learn. I suppose that real talent lies in being able to fix things, because things never turn out exactly the way you want them to.

MG: What about Dan Graham? When did you get to know him?

JB: In 1964, when he put me in the opening show of the Daniels Gallery. He was still a writer then. He did some writing on my work that wasn't published because of the flak over my letter to *Artforum*.

MG: Later, in 1969, Graham put together an issue of *Aspen* magazine in which you published a very long and dense pamphlet called 'Mach Bands.'<sup>4</sup> In that text, you discuss Mach's theories of vision and make a case for painting that's based on perceptual science. Had you already worked on the subject, or did Graham's invitation prompt you to take it up?

JB: Both. I had gone to one of Billy Kluver's seminars.<sup>5</sup> I learned a lot from it and did a lot of reading, which I found fascinating. Then I think Dan became interested in what I was interested in and asked me to expand on it, so I sat down and really tried to put it together.

MG: In your text, you explain why color glows more on one boundary than on the other in places where it's sandwiched between white and black.

JB: It's a retinal phenomenon. Visual activity adds light to whatever place the eye focuses on, so color in the focal area looks very bright and shimmering. The same color on the same surface but outside the focal area goes muddy.

MG: Which means that the color in your paintings appears to change as you walk past them.

JB: Yes, or as you stand in front of them.

MG: In some respects, then, the mobile spectator that Morris was interested in is also the viewer of your painting.

JB: Yes.

MG: You did this research after you'd done the paintings. There aren't many painters that I can think of from this period who would be able to look to science for a way of accounting for their work. What degrees had you done?

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<sup>4</sup> See this volume, p. xx .

<sup>5</sup> Given under the auspices of Experiments in Art and Technology, cofounded by Robert Rauschenberg, Billy Kluver, Robert Whitman and Fred Waldhauer.

JB: I didn't do degrees. I just went to classes. I worked on gestalt at the New School and took courses in physiological psychology and things like that at N.Y.U.

MG: The Mach Bands phenomenon doesn't happen in *Stations of the Spectrum*, the gray painting series.

JB: Well, it really does, but not importantly. In those the color glows.

MG: How did you get to these grayed works?

JB: I was interested in qualities of light as a subject, and I wanted a dimmer light, a twilight. So per one tube of Windsor white, titanium, add one-quarter teaspoon of Mars black.

MG: Why did you group the canvases?

JB: Originally they were six, and I split them into two triptychs.

MG: What was it about triptych and diptych formats that interested you at the time?

JB: I have written about it. I have said that a single painting is unique; a diptych has to do with identity--you've got it twice, now you know what it is; and three or more implies a continuous thing, an infinite number. I actually made *Stations of the Spectrum* to be hung in a circle. Or they could be grouped any way you want.

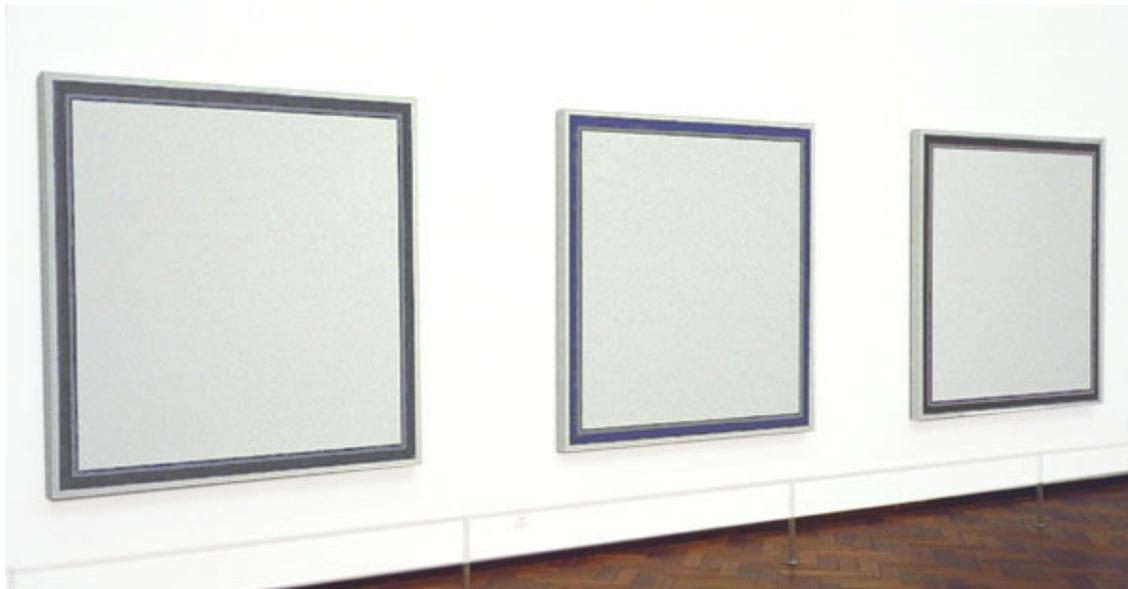


Fig. 3. *Stations of the Spectrum, Primary Colors*, 1967-1969, oil on canvas, each 183.5 x 182.9 x 6.8 cm

MG: The title “Stations of the Spectrum” obviously recalls “Stations of the Cross.”

JB: I was commenting on Barney Newman’s *Stations of the Cross*, which I saw at the Guggenheim in 1966. I thought it was a pretentious title, and he knew it. One of my triptychs went to Documenta in 1964, and he told me that he saw it there. He knew what I was doing.

MG: “Stations of the Spectrum” invokes the religious and fuses it with the scientific. You’ve spoken about your use of blue and its reference to the sky. In the Dia exhibition you showed drawings of little stars. There’s a metaphysical thread running through the work at times.

JB: Yes, but I don’t need it in the titles. I think that’s unnecessary. It sells work, I guess, but I don’t think it’s such a nice thing to do.

MG: All of this work was made during a very rowdy time in American politics. In September 1970, you contributed a text to a symposium in *Artforum* that asked artists to elaborate on the political import their work. Can you talk about the circumstances of that symposium or what you wrote?

JB: I wrote that you can go out in the world and work for whatever political cause that you feel that you should work for, but I didn’t think it had much to do with the art world. On the other hand, when Kent State happened, we asked the museums to take down our work.

MG: Who’s “we”?

JB: It was just a gathering of artists who met and asked for this to happen. We simply did not want business going on as usual. The Modern took down the work--they owned paintings of mine that were on show--and they put a sign up explaining why the art had been temporarily removed. The Whitney did the same thing. But the Guggenheim did something very strange. They emptied the entire museum and left it open. The director said he didn’t want artists coming in and vandalizing the works. Astonishing! As if we would do such a thing! *The Daily News* ran a two-page spread of the empty interior.

MG: Was this the same director who canceled the Hans Haacke show in 1971?

JB: Yes. Also, *The New York Times* came out with articles saying that artists should not interfere in politics, that they should just do their work and mind their own business. Chuck Close and Robert Lobe and I wrote a letter to the *Times* saying that therefore we would have no *Guernica* and so forth, but they didn’t publish it.

MG: The text that you wrote for *Artforum* says that abstract art can be radical and political. You argued that a work which has contained boundaries and a very strict structure implies a political attitude.

JB: I think we were naïve.

MG: To make those arguments?

JB: Yes. The work at that time was sometimes called utopian, but I think it was actually naïve. I say that now, looking back.

MG: The most dramatic shift in your work occurred in the mid '70s, and later you wrote a text called "I am no Longer an Abstract Artist."<sup>6</sup> Did your disillusionment with abstraction stem from a growing sense of this naïveté?

JB: I wasn't disillusioned with it. I just thought it was over. I thought it was time to move on and do other things. The world had changed and the work needed to change too. I thought there should be more content, more meaning, and I thought the work should be broader and invite more people, instead of addressing just the very high art world. I was really trying to expand the audience.

MG: At one point, the differences between your work of the '60s and '70s and your work of the late '70s, '80s and '90s seemed very stark. Do you sense connections between your current work and your work in this show?

JB: I have always seen a continuity.

MG: What is its basis?

JB: I haven't given anything up or away, I've just expanded.

MG: Do you mean that in terms of how the paintings are made, in terms of what you're doing with color? I recently saw works in your studio where greens and reds come together in a way that's not a million miles away from how color functions in the early work.

JB: I think that's correct.

MG: Does the continuity extend to other kinds of meanings?

JB: I don't think that way. Essentially I just think about the next work and what I want to do.

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<sup>6</sup> See this volume, p. xx.

MG: One of the high points in this show is the room with works by Judd, John Chamberlain and Oldenburg. It's a room which is obviously indebted to Judd's taste and sensibility, and a room which might help people see Minimalism in a more expansive way. Your tastes were also diverse. Do you feel that your work might be better seen in a broader context?

JB: I would prefer it in another context. I can see the difference between my work in this show and most of the rest of the art, the hard-core Minimalism.

MG: How would you describe that difference?

JB: Mine isn't as spare, it isn't cut down. I wasn't making gestures, I was making paintings. They have a different source. I've shown with Judds quite a lot in Europe, especially some of the later Judds. They're very brutal and big and colorful. You can hang my paintings beside them and it works. It won't work if you try the same thing with most of these other paintings that were done at the same time. So I can show as a Minimalist very well, even though I wasn't doing the same thing as these other artists.

I think Judd and LeWitt and Morris certainly were the best of them. Their work still holds. It's really there. That's one of my criteria for good art. If people are saying thirty and forty years later how fresh my works look, it's because I cared about exactly that—that the paintings should really be there.

MG: What got you to doing the wraparounds, the paintings you painted around the sides?

JB: I was interested in seeing what happens when you go around a corner. It's as simple as that. Things change quite radically in all kinds of ways when you go around a corner.



Fig. 4. *Sextet, White Wraparounds*, 1970, oil on canvas, each 91.5 x 99 cm

MG: In these paintings you almost efface the corner, because the black paint makes it nearly impossible to see.

JB: Yes. But remember that I'm a painter and I have a thing against sculpture, so of course I would do that.

MG: Some people react to these and to the paintings that come out of them, the ones called "Radiators," by asking whether you were not making painted sculpture. Presumably, you would say 'no.'

JB: Well they're only four inches deep. Some of Stella's are ten inches deep, and nobody asked him questions like that. So I figure at four inches I can duck that question. But in fact I prefer the flat surface. I have said many times that the wraparounds were interesting to do, and I'm glad I did them, but I don't think they're my best work. They take part too much in object-hood.

MG: I would disagree with you,

JB: A lot of young people do, but I think that's because it's no longer important whether something is sculpture or painting. It's no longer an interesting subject. In my day it was.

MG: What interests me about the wraparound paintings from the early '70s is that there's something deceptive about them. Often, fake shadows are painted in. There is trickery, and it goes on in the earlier works too. Painted vertical elements which look straight are actually slightly curved.

JB: This is *entasis*, as the Greeks did it.

MG: But that slyness gets cranked up to another level in these works from the '70s.

JB: Yes, but a painting is all about illusion anyway.

MG: I could quote from one of your texts in which you wrote that there's no illusion in your painting.

JB: Yes, you just did. Thank you very much. You can make a painting that has no illusion if you use illusions, because all vision is illusionary anyway. Everything that you see is the brain's best guess as to what's out there.

MG: Not only are these fake shadows painted in, but when the surface turns a corner, the colors often shift slightly. When you're looking at them, you're not sure whether it's the lighting in the gallery which is responsible or whether it's actually a change in color. There are a lot of these kinds of deceptions.

JB: Painting has always been about things like this. Otherwise, you'd use a camera. Painting has to do with light and how things change. Velasquez's grapes--the purple grapes where there's no paint there at all, but you see grapes --it goes back as long as painting. We play with stuff, and it's what makes things vibrant, stay alive, and interesting to look at.

MG: What is the reason that you live in Europe?

JB: Well, I get to ride a bicycle everywhere and I'm not in my own country, so whatever's happening, here or there, none of it's my fault. But there are lots of reasons.

*This interview was held at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in conjunction with the exhibition "A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968."*