Robert Swain c.1960s

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT SWAIN

by Matthew Deleget

Matthew Deleget: Our subject matter as painters is color and I often think about how intricate your research into color has been over the years. In fact, I think of you as a color researcher that makes paintings and not the other way around. Why is painting the best method for presenting your research?

Robert Swain: Well, first of all, I never entered into it in a scientific way. I became interested in color in the late 1960s. During that decade, I began trying to understand something about color. There wasn't a great deal of written information about it, and consequently a great deal of what I do is based on intuition. I started to look at color and to make charts and experimental work in an attempt to understand the phenomenology of color. I don't look at the work as being objective. I simply look at it as a way of trying to get into the subject matter of color and trying to understand through experience, through phenomenology, what color is about.

MD: And you entered this conversation not so much through a scientific background, but rather through a visual arts background. What's interesting is that a lot of people try to compare color to other fields of study, other disciplines, other things: mathematics, music, flavors, etc. But I know you don't think of color in its relationship to other things. You think of it in terms of what exactly?

RS: It's kind of strange. I think about color solely in terms of color. It's not about music. There are comparable aspects of music, such as its sense of modulation or of structure. I did, however, actually study with a man who based a lot of his work on the diatonic scale, which is the basis for all music.

MD: Who was that?

RS: Karl Knaths. He was an American Cubist who lived in Provincetown. The reason I don't like comparing color to other things is that then it becomes *about* those things and about the associations we have with those things. There are many pioneers who began to define what color phenomenology was in the 1960s. It still is a wide-open field; it hasn't been finished. But again, I throw my weight on the side of perception and phenomenology, trying to experience what it is and putting that into a frame of reference.

MD: Who has had an influence on your practice?

RS: I think that goes way back. At a certain point, my family moved to Arlington, Virginia, and I spent a lot of time in the National Gallery in Washington, DC. I used to look at certain paintings there very carefully. I was very involved and still am involved with Vermeer. I think that his sense of color is really remarkable. I look at a lot of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, a lot of people that came out of the Bauhaus, a lot of people like Albers. There is a whole host of people who have pioneered the idea of color as the primary subject matter in painting.

MD: In framing your work, thinking about what your painting does and how it provides a viewer the opportunity to see pure color, I had a difficult time coming up with comparable examples in the real physical world, objects that offer pure color, unmitigated, uncompromised, and uncontextualized in relation to a broader environment. There are very few examples of places or experiences in which isolated color is orchestrated for maximum effect. How does one experience color in your work? What kind of experience are you trying to elicit?

RS: One thing that fascinates me about color is that each individual color has its own connotation, which can be perceived as emotional or can affect you in some particular way. I strive to bring out the uniqueness of color itself as an expressive force. Color is involved with radiant energy. It's not passive, and in that sense, when you look at color, it's actually transferring energy into your physical self. So one of the things I try to do is to isolate some kind of configuration that allows color to speak of itself and for itself. When I go to a paint store or a hardware store, I always stop by the paint chip section and I always marvel at the people who stand there and pull out chips and look them, saying "No, this isn't right. I like this. Put these two together." That's one of the instances in which color frees itself from its associations, from its object, and people look at it for its own value. What would this be in my environment? I think that my painting over the years has been concerned with trying to allow color to be its own sense of expression without being attached to other obligations or associations.

MD: I like the idea of color literally being energy and how that energy can affect someone's emotional state, mood, or thought process. When experiencing your work first-hand, I am always sensorially, emotionally, and intellectually overwhelmed. I often have a hard time remembering what your work looks like. I'm immediately struck by the color experience washing over me. Once that subsides, however, I have the chance to *see* the work. I don't mean looking at the work. I mean seeing the work. The work then functions on a secondary level. The longer you let your rods and cones adjust, the more rewarding your works become. They start with a very quick hit, but they also have a slower, smoldering quality. I would love to hear from you about the experience of seeing your work. What do you expect from the viewer?

RS: I think your description is pretty close to what I would like a viewer to experience. I like that initial impact. I think there are things that have been described, for example, in the idea or concepts of the sublime in which you are confronted with something for which you have absolutely no explanation. It's ineffable. It consumes you and in one particular moment, you are taken to some other place. The secondary experience is that, yes, there is some kind of relational idea behind it, one that carries you to another place. I spent a time working in a museum and it had, for example, Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881). One of the amazing things about that painting is that it happens in real time. In other words, you're looking at it at that moment and understanding it. It isn't something you have to learn a language for or know an iconographic tradition to decipher. It happens in that moment and it's the radiant energy that does that. I have a pet theory: Impressionism and Post-Impression are so popular because people step up to them. It's not an illustration of something, but it actually demands that the perceptual processes operate. People have a rapport with it because, as the physicist Ogden Rood pointed out, your rods and cones are very active and you're engaged as a participant in this work of art. You are not a voyeur standing outside of it, but it requires you there, present, to look at it. I think your description is quite adequate in what I would hope a viewer would get out of viewing my work. The other problem in dealing with color is that it's very elusive. It's about sensation and is very hard to describe or classify.

MD: That makes me think about the binder I have of images of your work. In that binder, you state clearly that digital color printouts are by no means representative of what the work actually looks like, which is true. It's not anywhere near it, in terms of experience, of color, of saturation. What is it about color that needs to be seen first-hand?

RS: It requires you to see it in real time. It's not something to which you can attach a memory. You can say, well that's red, but red is an aspect of experience. To actually experience means that you confront it and allow it to operate physically and emotionally and so forth through a perceptual process. I think it's very difficult to have a color memory. I devised a numerical system so that I would be able to sort of track what color relationships are, but there isn't a clear descriptive way to say what happens when you put this blue next to this orange. You could say, "Well, they are complements or split complements." On the other hand, you could say, "These colors are harmonious, so they're analogous." But it's very difficult to understand that—even knowing that it happens in real time. You can describe a thunderstorm, but that's much different than being in it.

MD: That's a great analogy actually, a thunderstorm. You can kind of describe the color range in a work, but words are just as inaccurate as the memory of a painting. *Red*, *orange*, *blue* doesn't really describe what you are seeing. For the past forty, almost fifty years, you've been working in many different formats to display color. I'm thinking of your sliced circles, square grids, and the triangular and hexagonal pieces made in the 1960s. I'm thinking of your grid progressions. Most recently you've been making brushstroke paintings. Does color function across all of these different formats in the same way? Does, say, a cadmium red function the same way as a triangle, as a red square, or as a brushstroke?

RS: Each configuration orchestrates color differently. The initial problem I faced during the 1960s was culturally complicated. Abstract Expressionism was coming to the end of its heyday. A lot of younger artists I associated with were looking for paradigms, ways of painting that did not depend on pictorial space, and they wanted to break the association that high Modernism had with that space. You had, for example, the Minimalists trying to change the way that we deal with sculpture and space and painting. I decided that I was not going

to pursue color through pictorial space. I wanted to have it be an object on a surface that had its own limits and its own character. One of the first things I began to do was a series of paintings, now destroyed, that were basically linear grids organized spectrally. The spectrums themselves made the shapes; I was trying to get rid of the idea that I had to have a shape to rationalize the use of a color. So I started looking at circles, triangles, hexagons, equilateral triangles in individual components, units, modules. I wanted the color—yellow, say—to be painted on a square module and be connected to others, in some cases, a hundred other squares, yet maintain its identity.

MD: These were literally painted on structural units that you bolted together.

RS: Structural units, either stretchers or plywood that was stretched with canvas, primed, and painted with a paintbrush. In some instances, I left the brushstrokes in there. I was trying to say that this color has its own boundaries, its own area or location. Several things followed from this. I found that the triangles and the hexagons worked beautifully. The points of the triangles where they came together created a different sensation than the adjacencies at the wider end of each shape. A single color could have many connotations because of its varied relationship with the edge. And this goes back to Michel Eugene Chevreul's idea of simultaneous contrast and other technical terms, but essentially it means that color is always seen within a relationship, a relationship that changes its entire appearance. For some time I tried many different forms, before I finally settled on the square grid or rectilinear grid built of squares, a neutral format where color, not shape, was given a voice.

MD: You also moved away from these structural units because they became unwieldy and heavy.

RS: The individual units, yes. I did a very large painting for the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. The physical weight of the entire piece was outrageous and difficult to deal with. So I started to move back to working on a single canvas.

MD: You mentioned something earlier about some of the artists that you were working with. During the 1960s, whose studios were you visiting? Who were you sharing ideas with? Who did you feel you had a critical relationship with? Who were you palling around with?

RS: There was a group of young people that came to New York at about the same time I did, in the mid-1960s, a lot of them from California. Everybody was trying to establish a new language, a new vocabulary, a new paradigm. Several things happened. The "Primary Structures" show at The Jewish Museum, which I was not in, had a lot of new sculptural work that established a different paradigm and changed art's relationship with the viewer. Those artists were people like Ronald Bladen, Tony Smith, Robert Grosvenor, and Forrest Myers. There was also a non-profit gallery, Park Place Gallery, which I exhibited in but was not a member of. A lot of the work there was very experimental, using experimental materials. A lot of these materials were found on Canal Street. Plastic, fiberglass. I think Claes Oldenburg once said that Canal Street, with all its hardware stores, plastic stores, electric stores, was the palette for artists in the 1960s. A lot of this work was experimental. It was not produced to be sold in the art market. Pieces were made out of cardboard. It was an attempt, above all,

to organize new experiences. Later in the 1960s, I became a friend of and worked for Tony Smith and found a great deal of satisfaction in the conversations that Tony and I would have about art.

MD: You mentioned a number of sculptors and described a lot of installation work. You were making paintings, primarily about color experience. Did you share notes with any painters?

RS: I was close to David Novros, Bob Duran, and Gay Glading, all of whom I was looking at because they were doing experimental work. I ran into some problems because my work became more and more about color. This was at a time when interest gravitated towards material substances, work in which the content was either inherent in the process or the materiality of what you were looking at. For example, something would be a shape painted with glitter. I wasn't involved with that. I was more involved with the sensation of color.

MD: It was at about this time that you began indexing color. You spent many years mixing, measuring, and mapping color and all its inherent qualities. From what I understand, you started that in the early 1970s and you've currently got more than four thousand individually mixed and painted color chip samples in your studio. What motivated you to start this process?

RS: A lot of people think this process is quite unusual. I don't think it's unusual at all. I was trained from an early age, and studied realism, anatomy, and painting of that nature. When I began to work with non-representational concepts, I discovered I didn't really understand anything about color. So in a very primitive way I painted color charts to try to get some fundamental understanding of how colors related and contrasted and things like that. Also, there were a couple of art stores in New York. One called David Davids was owned by a very eccentric individual. He would actually let me put samples of all his oil paint on a little piece of paper. There were paint brands from Europe and the United States, and I became fascinated by color charts. I started to look at them. I started to try to understand what the difference was between this red produced in Germany and that red produced in France. And not unlike Albers collecting all these paint samples, at a certain point I started envisioning what I was doing as being like studying anatomy. You really have to know the entire muscle and bone structure. So I said, "Well, I'll develop a hue circle." I looked at a lot of different people who had built hue circles. They go back for centuries and because of that my next thought was, "Well, if you're going to deal with this as subject matter, you'd better develop some way to record it, index it, document it, analyze it." It seemed a natural thing. I started building a color system, which right now has 4,896 pieces—and I'm hoping to add to it.

MD: Is your research into color complete at this point? It sounds like it's not.

RS: No, I don't think so. It's a domino effect. Once you start to look at something, it leads you right into something else. I ask myself what a certain yellow looks like in combination with blue and green and something else. It becomes a very compound problem.

MD: Tell me about the thirty-part hue circle. How did you arrive at a circular format? Why does it have thirty parts? How does this circle operate?

RS: When you begin dealing with color, you have to decide how many yellows, reds, oranges, violets, and blues are going to be in your color system. So you start to look at the history of color and you find that certain color experts decided there should be ten or twelve or twenty-four. And I struggled with that for a long time. I actually did some eight-and-a half-foot paintings that were based on color circles. They looked like pie-shaped hue circles. Munsell, who's a leading color theorist and artist himself, built a color system that uses five primary colors. Other systems of color use six. I was in an awkward position. Did I believe there are six primaries? Three primaries and three secondaries? Or five primaries? I combined both systems and decided there would be thirty. Also, I found the interval relationship moving from yellow to red to orange a very smooth one, with each color retaining its identity, while still relating to the one next to it. I settled upon my system visually. It wasn't done mathematically. There was no logical progression. It was simply done by painting color charts, looking at them, and deciding that X would be the correct component for Y. It was different from systems based upon ratios or mathematical formulas.

MD: And how long did you spend wrapping your brain around this system?

RS: Each step of it represents a certain group of paintings, and it's still ongoing. It took me a few years just to decide on the hues.

MD: Your thirty-part hue circle includes only pure hues, right? I've seen color charts that you've created that map not just pure hues, but also saturation and value shifts. They tend to be gridded forms, mapping a yellow, mapping an orange, mapping a blue, mapping a violet. How many of those charts are there?

RS: There are supposed to be thirty of them, each of which has an individual color like yellow and a breakdown of its components made by adding white to it, adding black to it, or gray. And color is three-dimensional. It has three dimensions to it: hue, value, and saturation. These are technical things with which I'm engaged, but the normal viewer simply has to know that there are light colors, dark colors, colors which are unsaturated, and grays—things of that nature. I broke this down into thirty-three different hue steps, ranging from light to dark and up to nine different saturation steps, meaning that you could have a pure orange and then, by adding gray to it, it eventually dissipates in its purity and becomes sort of a brown, a word I never use.

MD: The word *brown*.

RS: Yes.

MD: Why is that?

RS: I think a lot of words are not very accurate, not very descriptive. If I said to you, "You're in Italy, you have a brown house"—what does that mean? Is it red-brown, orange-brown? How can we define it? In the 1960s, a group of people came up with the idea that you describe color either by its hue, value, or saturation, and doing that generates a more accurate idea of what that color is. I took that notion and assigned it to a number, which a lot of other people dealing with color also did. I know what color #15 is. I know #25 is kind of dark. When you say, "Its saturation is #5," I know it's not quite pure and it's not quite unpure either. There are ways that you can delineate and describe color with a numerical system that enables you to understand some of the relationships. It doesn't give you the whole content, but it gives you an idea.

MD: When I first visited your studio a few years ago I was surprised to discover that you have a lot of computer equipment in it. I know that you've been working with a color spectrometer to measure the light characteristics of the paint you're mixing. I would love for you to talk a little bit about how technology assists you in mixing and measuring the qualities of the paint you're ultimately using in the paintings. What motivated you to get a spectrometer?

RS: One of the problems in working with color is keeping tabs on it. People who manufacture color for artists change the quality of the color because they buy pigment on the open market. My quest was to keep the color consistent so that I could analyze the sensations it evoked. If you bought a yellow and it had a little more orange in it, you would lose the necessary consistency. Computer technology is very interesting. I'm sure that if Monet was alive today, he'd have five computers. Da Vinci would probably have ten. They're instruments. People don't realize that the revolution in the history of oil paint, at a certain point, was the discovery that it could be put in tubes. Artists could go out in the field with a tube of paint. It was a big learning curve for me to get into computers. I use them as an extension of the way to calibrate, to look at, and to document color. The technology you're talking about, a photo spectrometer, an instrument that measures the wavelength of color, cost $500,000 back in the 1960s. You can buy one for your home computer these days for probably less than $1,000. It only measures wavelengths of color. It tells you what the color is, what the wavelength is, and things of that nature. It's very helpful, when you're handling 4,896 colors, to keep them organized. Ultimately, my quest is to put into categories color sensations.

MD: Are you premixing all of those paints, all 4,896 of them?

RS: Sure.

MD: You have tubes or jars that are ready to go that have been mapped and measured?

RS: I have a lot of jars of paint.

MD: I've seen that this kind of work is very difficult for people to understand. The point of entry can be hard to access. A lot of people think that this work gets beamed in from outer space, that a living, breathing, human being couldn't have made this work. Can you tell me about your process for making a painting? Where does the painting start in terms of your studio, your mindset, your worldview?

RS: It begins with the idea that in looking at a lot of colors, I'm fascinated, for example, by a certain green. Then I try to find how this particular green can be placed in relationship

with some other colors to bring out its characteristics. The green might be placed next to its complement, a red, and it might also modulate to other colors that have some relationship to the red or green. Essentially what I am looking for is a window, an opportunity to use the special characteristics of a particular color and some of its other related relationships. For example, you might modulate from green into blue into violet and end up in red, but you are looking for ways that you can orchestrate the experience of looking at a particular color. It's kind of like landscape painting: you would say, "I'm going to paint under this light, under these circumstances, and I'm going to use the excuse, or the armature of the mountain to get at some of these colors or sensations." I just skip the landscape part and go right to the color.

MD: So a painting may begin with a specific color, and you follow the choice of it with a question: What if? What if it's combined with a violet or a blue, or juxtaposed with an orange? Do you work these questions out in your head? Are you working with a computer? Are you working with paint chips? How do you go about laying out what ultimately becomes a painting?

RS: First, I think of it in my head, and then I lay it out numerically with my color system. I jot down some relationships, numbers. Since a lot of colors are involved, I've developed a kind of logic for dealing with numbers. I know how a #3 relates to a #17. And for a certain value, I have another number. If I think it's going to work conceptually, then I will do a study of it on a computer, look at the image very carefully, actually print out an inkjet print to see the relationships. During the 1960s, 1970s, and for much of the 1980s, I would paint these studies by hand. It would take me maybe a month to mix up the paint for the study. Many times I wouldn't like three of the colors in the study so I'd have to go back and redo the whole thing—over and over again. Computers allow you to expedite decision-making. For one painting, I might make fifty or sixty studies. I can change them that quickly. It allows me to get access to the structural organization immediately. After I do that, I paint a study and I look at it. Sometimes I have to paint several studies because the pigment is not the same as an inkjet print, which I like a great deal. You can't reproduce the aura of painting with inkjet mechanics. It has to be done in reality with pigment.

MD: Nor viewing it solely on a computer screen. It's a very different experience. Are the studies large? Small? Are they on paper? On canvas? What do they look like?

RS: Initially, they are inkjet prints. Then I paint studies of different sizes. And if I think a small size, say a twenty-four-inch painting, is going to work at a larger scale, I will move it up to seven or eight or nine feet. But it's done in steps, and every step is judged perceptually. If I think there is any flaw in it, then I'll change it. In the past I would try to paint these things flat out in scale and a lot of them wouldn't work at all.

MD: And then would you go back into it and repaint it? Or just scrap it and start over?

RS: Sometimes I go back and repaint it, a fact that in part comes out of my traditional background. In classical painting, the artist makes a drawing. He does a preliminary study. He does a small painting. Georges Seurat's painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a good example of an intermediate step that Seurat took before painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-1886). I've always followed that traditional process.

MD: What does that process look like from start to finish? How long will you sit with a painting before you make the decision to paint it?

RS: I've worked on paintings for two or four years before I decided to paint them. A lot of this is done through color studies, which may take six months to a year. I don't have a time schedule. I wish I did. I wish I had some way I could do X, Y, and Z, and be finished. It seems that most paintings have their own particular lifespan and they want to be served in a certain way. Some of the larger things I've done, ten by thirty feet, have taken me over a year of uninterrupted work. Mine is not a particularly productive process, but that's what it takes to do it.

MD: In looking at forty years of your work, it becomes pretty clear that your exploration hasn't been linear. Your investigation has been more helix-shaped or coiled spring–shaped: you looked at something in the 1960s, returned to it in 1970s, tweaked it again in the 1980s or 1990s. What are the key concerns, in addition to color, that keep you going back into the studio and revisiting earlier work? Are you consciously thinking about the work you made in the 1960s and 1970s? Does your earlier work play a role in the work you're making now?

RS: I think a main thread runs through all of it, although it's one that's influenced by many different things. I think, for example, that there is a general cultural paradigm that influences all artists. Back in the 1980s, I designed a large light piece for a site in Texas. It was never built, but it was supposed to be on the outside of a building and be controlled by a computer that displayed color to people driving by in trucks and cars. My influence at that time was a kind of cultural influence: people were getting out of the studio, people were building earthworks, people were working outside of the frame of conventional art. But I am mainly driven by how color can be presented in a new way to people. There are inherent problems in that. People are still struggling to understand non-representational art, abstract art. But I'm trying to get to a position where I can give to the viewer greater access to this subject matter. It's governed by a lot of factors.

MD: I want to discuss the works you made during the 1960s and 1970s. A lot of your earlier work has shifts in saturation that go from one edge to the opposite edge or from one corner to the opposite corner; a pure color runs along one side and then it dissipates. I've really only seen one example of your work, the Johnson & Johnson commission, that is organized down the middle and is bilaterally symmetrical. I remember you referring to your preferred mode as dynamic equilibrium, which is about organizing things asymmetrically. Tell me a little bit about it.

RS: Dynamic equilibrium is a concept that has been used since the Renaissance. It is a way of describing a type of internal tension in a work of art. That tension is such that it gives a presence to the work of art that the viewer can acknowledge. It distinguishes itself from pure design; instead of having everything be harmonic, it aims for tension. The Johnson & Johnson painting is symmetrical. It does have on opposite sides saturated and unsaturated colors, so the symmetry, in a way, is kind of challenged and torn apart. There is some tension there. A

lot of my work, as with other artists, strives to achieve a kind of tension through dynamic equilibrium, either through spatial relationships or through color relationships. I've always admired, for example, Pierre Bonnard, who will put two hues together, say orange and blue, but will add white to both. The orange and blue are complements, but the white is a unifier pulling the two hues back together. He will also add the same amount of saturation to two hues, to create an interesting relationship. In a sense, he is creating the perfect relationship, a certain amount of tension and a certain amount of stability, or equilibrium. I've worked asymmetrically by placing large against small. I've worked with harmonies or colors that are analogous against contrast. The idea is to strive for some type of dynamic equilibrium. Piet Mondrian is another good example of an artist who talked about disturbing the symmetry of something through spatial relationships.

MD: I think that quality is why your work, even when it's forty or fifty years old, seems so current, so dynamic. The compositions are not staid or stable or set in any way. They're in a state of being, a state of transforming, which I find really compelling.

RS: That's what I strive for. I think all artists strive for that.

MD: In structuring the paintings themselves—particularly with the grid-based paintings—you are using squares. I know you are zeroing in on a few different sizes: seven-inch squares, nine-inch squares, and 13.75-inch squares. I'm assuming color functions pretty differently at each of those sizes.

RS: Yes.

MD: Is it about the *area* of that color, or is it about the *length* of the side of that square and its relationship to the other colors adjacent to it? Is there an ideal size for color interaction?

RS: It's kind of strange. For years, I tried to figure out how the viewer could see the original color in the middle of the square when different colors are placed in the four adjacent squares. When the different colors interact, they create different color sensations. Initially I thought nine-inch squares would allow that to happen, but it seemed that the color relationships with the other squares dominated the one on which the viewer concentrated, so I began increasing the size of each square. The larger I made the square, the more the initial color retained its identity. And the adjacent colors created other colors. I began to look at them from a certain viewing distance and changed the size of the square over and over again. I finally ended up with what I thought was the ideal square simply by sitting and looking at it; it turned out to be twelve inches. I don't know why.

MD: Twelve inches was the ideal.

RS: Yes, at a certain viewing distance.

MD: Is there a size at which that breaks down, either a square being too small and almost becoming pixilated or too large and almost becoming a field?

RS: Yes, but that led me also to move away from a symmetrical grid and start to have big blocks of color next to small blocks of color.

MD: And that began in the 1980s, right? The mid-1980s?

RS: Yes.

MD: What motivated you to do that?
RS: I wanted one big block of color to remain and have its own identity. I would paint, for example, a big block of violet and then smaller colors that created different phenomenological sensations. You would see a passive large violet square next to a small, interactive one. It's a perfect description of dynamic equilibrium, a balance between passive and interactive.

MD: Many of the paintings you made during the 1980s were divided into elements with two-thirds of the space at the top and a third at the bottom. It seemed like distinct activities happened in each of those spaces. It's almost as if four paintings are working in concert within the same painting structure. What was your motivation for having multiple things happening simultaneously in a single painting?

RS: That goes back to an earlier part of the conversation. You want a painting to be durational. So it starts out looking one way and then it modulates or changes its configuration through a relationship to create a different experience. A large passive violet square leads through modulation to other sizes; it steps up and down.

MD: And I think that the color decisions you made in these paintings from the 1980s have bigger, broader steps. They tend to be less spectral and use much more disparate colors. In some cases, almost discordant color.

RS: That's a marvelous description of what I ran up against when I was dealing with only the grid paintings. There was a lot of phenomenology in the color, but we weren't seeing the individual color itself. We weren't seeing its characteristics. We were seeing a lot of fluctuation of light, radiant energy. So I decided part of the painting should be static, and it should be about a particular color. The other part should have this phenomenology within it. That was the rationale.

MD: Let's move on to the work you've been making for the past half decade, the brushstroke paintings. I felt this was another new and radical step forward for your work—to create visible brushstrokes and a surface that was no longer flat but rather built-up depending on how the brushstrokes were laid down. Many of these works have a grid-based progression that goes from a very, very small, almost Pointillist dot, for lack of a better term, to larger, very expressive brushstrokes. How did you arrive at this new strategy? How did you decide that the brush needed to come into it in a more visible way? That the surface needed to be built up?

RS: One thing I'm consistently concerned with is releasing the energy of color—because it is about energy. I began to think about the grid paintings as being a little too passive. They released some of the energy. I had done some brushstroke paintings back in the 1960s that

got destroyed. They didn't really work that well because I didn't understand color that well. But I took up the brushstroke again and I began to make parts of the paintings big and parts very small so that when you scan the surface of the painting, you had access to the radiant energy. But that energy changed as I made the brushstrokes smaller. When the brushstrokes became almost Pointillist, the colors mixed and combined in a completely different way than they did when the brushstrokes were larger. I really wanted to focus upon releasing the energy so that each painting was very much about being in the same environment with the viewer and the energy was radiating off the surface—in addition to being something to look at. I also became fascinated with the electronic age, in which you are bombarded with energy. A great deal of the content is inherent in how this energy is released to you as the viewer.

MD: So tell me about your approach to making a brushstroke painting.

RS: First, I got rid of all my art brushes. I went out and bought very cheap horsehair brushes. I use them once and throw them away. The mark you make with it, you can't make a good a mark. The brush is made so crudely. I remember this thing that Frank Stella and Willem de Kooning were once discussing. De Kooning was talking about how he took such good care of his brushes and saying that he soaked them in lye. He tried to shape them and make them. At the other end of the table, somebody said to Stella, "Well, what do you do?" He responded, "I don't know. I just hire a bunch of guys and get some paintbrushes." I've been struggling to figure out whether I should use a more subjective brushstroke or whether it should be more mechanical. I painted a couple that were more mechanical and I didn't like them. It's very hard to figure out.

MD: Have you ever used studio assistants to make your work?

RS: They've never painted any part of a final painting. They've helped me paint preparatory stuff.

MD: Let's discuss the impact of the brushstroke format on color itself. The paint is put on relatively thickly. The very top edge of a stroke is highlighted and the bottom edge is shadowed, which again throws the color into a few different directions. Was that your intention?

RS: Yes. I was trying to get at different characteristics of color by using an active brushstroke. Also, the brushstroke is, in some instances, very material, so there's a dialectic between sensation and material, and again it goes back to the idea of dynamic equilibrium. There is something that looks very visceral, and then something that's very elusive and kind of flickers across the edge. The changing scale also helps achieve this. The durational process of comprehending it requires you to sort of scan the surface.

MD: Do you feel that these paintings are more physical than your earlier, grid-based paintings?

RS: Yes.

MD: How did you develop the specific brushstroke you are using in these paintings? I know you have a pre-planned underlying progression in terms of its scale, one that gives viewers the opportunity to see the color in multiple ways.

RS: First of all, I grid off the paintings. I start up at the top with very large squares and then go down to very small squares. I use a series of brushes, some large, some small. I don't necessarily adhere to the grid. I simply use it as a point of orientation. But it's just my brushstroke. It's just the best I can do to put on the paint. I am trying to not have uniform brushstrokes, but to have what would be not really a random brushstroke either, but one that would not bring a great deal of attention to itself. I haven't really resolved the problem of the brushstroke. I started back in the 1960s using brushstrokes in these grid paintings, but it got to the point where I wasn't happy with how it worked.

MD: The brushstrokes themselves are not ordinary. They retain their hard edges and they're not transparent or painterly in any way. They are like monochrome blobs of color. How are you putting the paint down?

RS: Initially, when I started using fine-art brushes, they seemed to create a very reserved brushstroke, so, like I said, I switched to very inexpensive brushes. They didn't allow me to put a lot of aesthetic emphasis into my marks, and I liked that better. But keeping the edges clean is important. That's then where the colors can interact. If the edges aren't clean, then the color becomes muddled a little bit. There is, during the transformation from one spot in the painting to another, quite a significant change in each color's appearance. You'll see colors emanating one kind of energy and then as your eye moves towards the bottom they'll emanate another. I've also always had this idea that the upper right and lower left, or the top and bottom of the painting, should be different. They should constitute some kind of context wherein the activity occurs.

MD: How did you arrive at that? Why the upper right and the bottom left, or the top versus bottom?

RS: I started out with the idea that color has three dimensions. I thought, "If I'm going to use color, it should have an element of black in it and an element of white"—to show contextually the three dimensions of color: dark and light; saturated and unsaturated; and different hue relationships. It came out of that idea.

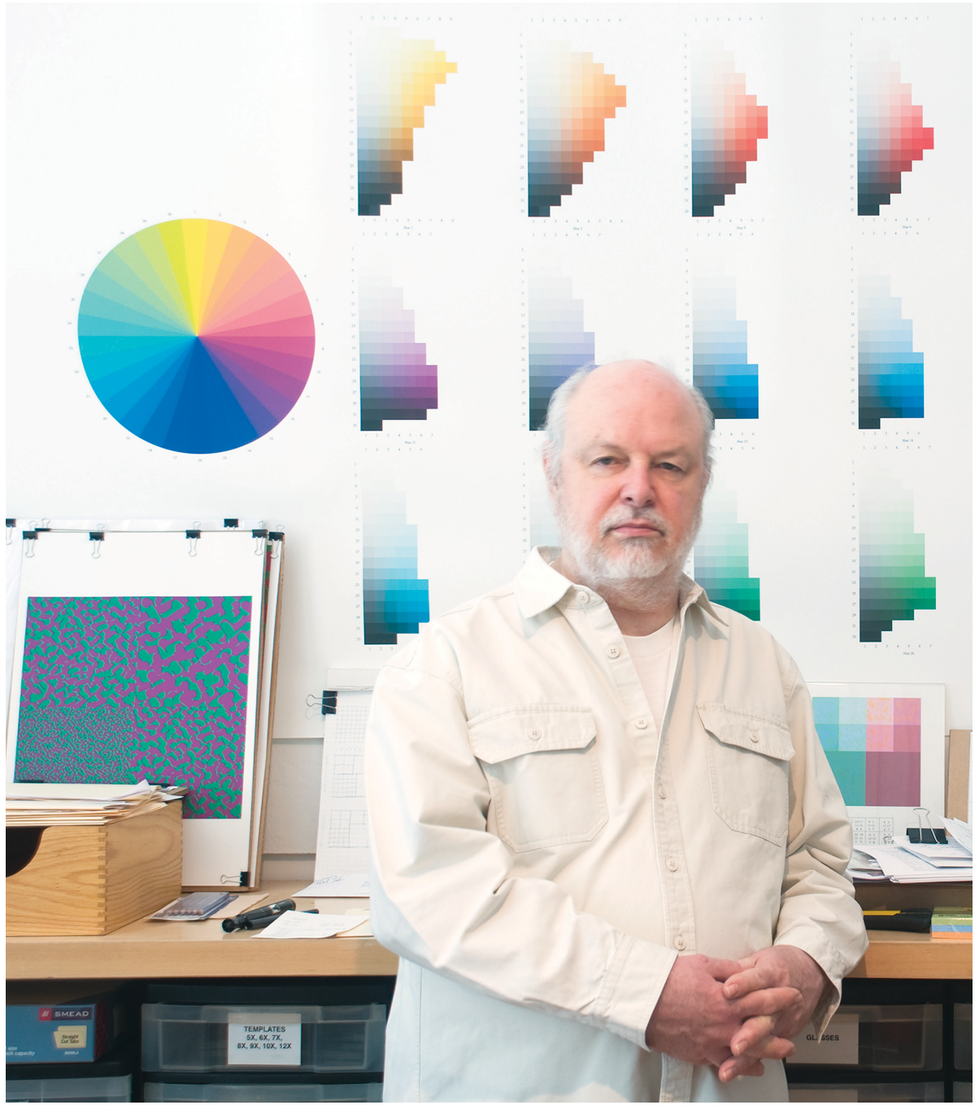
MD: I suspect many viewers will see a vast difference between the grid-based paintings and the brushstroke paintings. Do you want to offer a few words about the relationship between those two strategies?

RS: Initially many of the grid paintings were an attempt to understand and develop a knowledge of color and how color actually had the ability to be expressive. And I think the brushstroke paintings represent an approach in which color assumes a completely different posture. It's not passive, it's active. I think that's an important aspect of color, that it can actually generate all this energy.

MD: Finally, you are going to be showing at Hunter College forty or fifty years' worth of work; a huge span of time, a huge body of work. Many ambitious paintings, many ambitious projects. But I don't really think of this as being a retrospective. This is a mid-career survey and I'm wondering where you're going with the work over the next few years. What's piquing your interest? Where are there opportunities for exploration?

RS: You know I've been working a lot with these brushstroke ideas. And I have some conceptual ideas about expanding the paintings to include more aspects of the phenomenology that comes out of the spectrum. So it would require larger scales. I think probably different configurations. I'm kind of shocked that I ended up with forty or forty-five years' worth of painting. I never looked at it in retrospect that way. I think most painters pursue their work as a type of educational experience. I'm adding language, vocabulary. I'm trying to better define my logic. I'm trying to let my intuition determine how my paintings should be developed. I think intuition is a very strange thing. It operates independently of your intellect. You may think you know something, but at some point, your intuition will let you see some other aspect of it. I have depended most of these years on my intuition to lead me to the next body of work, to the next thing I might do. I am always working with certain variables and then all of a sudden it says to me, "Well, there is this opportunity. Why don't you look into this?" I'm not worried about my intuition's ability to generate new directions for me. I'm worried about the ability to understand what my intuition is conceptually forming for me and how it's going to lead me to the next step.

Interview conducted on May 14, 2010 at Robert Swain's studio, 57 Leonard Street, New York City



Robert Swain in his studio, 2009