

## Doug Freed Interview

**Damon Freed** Nearly 30 years ago I recall standing before a painting in my father's studio and feeling a mysterious pull on my senses. The painting was a multi-paneled abstraction with an empty dark brown center. My mind wandered deep into that eerie void of nothingness. I remember standing alone before the piece with my father at one end of the studio and me at the other. Completely silent and in deep contemplation as a child it was as though a great adventure awaited me inside of the painting. Safety and fear greeted me at the same time. My mortality was being shown to me on the canvas, yet it was articulated without the slightest hint of aggression. This is the effect my father's work has always had on me, one of depth and understanding. His paintings are quietly passive, yet giant in scale, even when painted on small canvases or paper. Now, he paints what I would like to hesitantly call landscapes. They exist between representation and abstraction in a realm that few other painters can call their own. But regardless of their category, the paintings are still up to their same old tricks of core communication, pleasantly so, they continue to ask more questions than provide answers.

**Damon Freed** Let's talk about this middle ground you've found between abstraction and realism. How did this occur?

**Doug Freed** It comes out of years and years of painting color field images. When I was dealing with the geometric structures I started in 1978, I thought I was dealing with pure abstraction. But I started seeing references in those void areas or large color fields that were areas between the panels. I started seeing references to clouds, fields, tree tops, and I remember being in the studio one time and indulged that and painted a landscape. It was kind of shocking for me. I couldn't stand it being a landscape, so I took these great big brushes and pretty much destroyed it and it left this kind of faint image that was very similar to the painted fields that I was doing but it left enough reference that you could really get some idea of tree tops, hill tops, that sort of thing. It was very ambiguous though.

**Damon Freed** Did you know the ambiguity was going to be important to the work?

**Doug Freed** I think so. From the very first time I started really seriously painting and particularly doing non-objective paintings, I think that my idea was that I was dealing with imagery that was from the mind of man, not nature. So dealing with that kind of invented imagery, ambiguity was very much something that I was striving for. I wanted it to be ambiguous. I wanted the viewer to have to really look at it and pull from the work what was in their own mind, not necessarily what was in my mind.

**Damon Freed** Something that has always impressed me and others about your practice is how prolific you are. Can you talk about that a bit?

**Doug Freed** I think I just have a kind of workman like personality. I like to go to my studio. I like structure in my life. For many years I was trying to maintain a career as an artist so I had to get into my studio and make paintings and also I was teaching all that time; and of course, in later years I was running an art museum so I had to be prepared to hit the ground running when I entered my studio. I think that forced me to be really focused. Time was such a rare commodity, although, I had a great schedule and was able to work my teaching hours into my studio time. I

was fortunate in that regard. But I was always able to compartmentalize myself, so that I was that compartment that was a teacher and I was that compartment that was an artist and I was that compartment that was a family member and a citizen. I've always been involved in serving on committees and boards. But I think that compartmentalization has allowed me to be very prolific, and I spend time doing the work that's the bottom line. My thought processes happen more when I'm standing in front of the canvas working. The last painting that I paint always paints the next painting – if that makes any sense. So while I'm creating that painting, I'm thinking about what I'm going to do next – but I don't slave over that. I enter the studio and just work.

**Damon Freed** You mentioned your role as a citizen, do you think artists have roles as citizens?

**Doug Freed** I do feel that an artist has a role as a citizen and I think that the country has grown in such a way that artists are taken more seriously now so they have more of an opportunity to become part of their communities and to become more of a citizen, whether it's serving on art related boards or political boards or whatever that they are interested in. I think one of the richest things for me has been this life in a small community because in a small community I've been able to function as an artist businessman. As an entrepreneur I think I've been taken very seriously and it's afforded me an opportunity to take a real leadership role in my community in a lot of different ways, serving for committees of city government and various non-for-profit boards. I've gained tremendous pleasure in that. It's a balancing thing for me, I think.

**Damon Freed** What role does the viewer play in your work?

**Doug Freed** I had pretty singular audiences when I was first emerging as an artist in the late '70's and '80's. I was showing primarily in New York and San Francisco and a little bit in the Midwest in Saint Louis and Kansas City, but most of my audience was that New York audience. In that period of time I was just doing what I was doing and that was pretty serious minimalist painting. I was looking at abstract work that had preceded me, everything from the Color Field painters to the Abstract Expressionists. Before that I was really influenced by some of the Minimalists that were working at that time, not so much the Minimalist sculptors but the Minimalist painters. The work I was doing was about being an object so I didn't have to be too concerned about the audience. It was what it was. If people liked it and responded to it, hopefully, they would buy it and I was very fortunate and they did. When I started moving toward painting landscapes, the audience became more important to me or I was more aware of the audience. As I acquired more galleries that were other places than New York and San Francisco, I even became more concerned. The imagery I was working with needed to somehow be related to those areas I was showing in. That sounds commercial but it afforded me an opportunity to really explore different kinds of imagery. The imagery was always related. It was always very much about my signature work. It was always about voids and fields and suggested landscape imagery. It could be about ocean or it could be about fields and landscapes like here in the Midwest or rivers and streams and lakes. So I think I have become aware of my audience. When I'm painting in my studio I do paintings for the Miami audience, I do paintings for the New York audience, I do paintings for the Midwest, and I have a gallery in Boston I think about as well. I am concerned about those audiences and I try to produce art that somehow could be related to by those audiences; not dummifying down to them, but somehow using those natural things that occur there visually in terms of landscape as my source. And of course I travel a lot to those places and take lots of photographs and use those photographs as sources to kind of spark my memory of what I have seen.

**Damon Freed** Marcel Duchamp stated that the viewer completes the work of art, do you agree with that or do you feel the work is completed in the studio?

**Doug Freed** Well another artist I've always admired is Rauschenberg. He has that very famous statement that as soon as the work leaves the studio it takes on a life of its own and I certainly believe that. I believe both Duchamp's concept and Rauschenberg's that when it's in the studio it is a part of you and it's about one thing but as soon as it goes out there into the world it becomes about something totally different because whoever sees it is making up their own context for the work. But, I hope the work is universal enough in its imagery. That's what I struggle with and strive for in my landscape painting. I don't want it to be site specific. I just said that I'm thinking of those audiences geographically in the country but on the other hand it's not site specific. I mean I'm not doing a specific place on a specific river or on a bay looking over specific rocks or in Miami looking out over the ocean in a specific place, and the last thing that I would ever do is title the work after a place that I'm thinking of in my head. I'm striving for universality. My work is a synthesis of those visual experiences I've had. It's about the passage of time, light, and color. The line created by the abutment of panels delineates the passing of time within the picture plane.

**Damon Freed** Is there a specific mood about your work?

**Doug Freed** Oh, I think very much so. I do fully chromatic paintings from time to time but even those that use hotter color, I always subdue. I think my paintings are always about a kind of quieting place. I try to paint paintings that create, this may sound hokey, but I'm very much concerned with the spiritual, not religious spiritual but the visual spiritual in images. And I've always related to Oriental work that contained that, particularly Zen work. And there's always peacefulness there. There's always a quietude that I like. My whole life as a painter my work has been about that – very quiet, very subtle.

**Damon Freed** Would it be too much to say that you create a soothing picture?

**Doug Freed** That doesn't bother me. That would bother other people I guess. It's like saying, "You create pretty pictures." Well that doesn't really bother me either. That's someone else's hang up if they think it's a problem. I mean to me great art has always been about beauty. As far back as you go even ugly art is beautiful in its ugliness. There are certain colors that I kind of avoid. It's very difficult for me to paint a painting that uses bright hot colors because it's tough for me to make that soothing. It becomes more decorative and I don't want my work to be decorative. Now there was a time between probably '88-'92 that I was doing these elaborate asymmetrical shaped canvases that approached being decorative, but they never really went there because even those were subtle in the modulation of color and the juxtaposition of one structure in a painting and how it was edged by another color.

**Damon Freed** You mentioned the spiritual so I'd like to delve a little deeper into that. Hans Hoffman described the spiritual as, "The emotional and intellectual synthesis of relationships perceived in nature, rationally, or intuitively. Spirituality in an artistic sense should not be confused with religious meaning." Do you agree with his summary of the topic?

**Doug Freed** Oh, I agree with Hoffman one hundred percent. In fact, I think Hoffman led the ground with his whole push pull methodology of painting – juxtaposing two colors and allowing

those colors to seek a level off of the canvas or to sink into the canvas. That was one of the very beginnings that triggered spirituality in color, those pure color pieces. But, yeah, I agree with that one hundred percent. The spiritual comes from somehow a synthesis of everyday experience and that feeling of peace and tranquility that one gets when he sees a beautiful landscape or a sunset or fog setting in over a lake. All of those are spiritual experiences for me.

**Damon Freed** Well, just to round it out and take another approach at it, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay Art: "As far as the spiritual character of the period overpowers the artist and finds expression in his work, so far it will retain a certain grandeur, and will represent to future beholders the Unknown, the Inevitable, the Divine." Do you believe this to be true, and in this sense is the spiritual connected to the Divine?

**Doug Freed** The divine is a little bit religious to me. On the other hand I think what Emerson was saying has a lot of truth in it. One of the things I battled with particularly during the '80's and '90's was Postmodernism, because so many times a Postmodernist painter, writer, whatever, just didn't have a belief system in the spiritual, and the spiritual during that period of time, even to the 2000's, was a really bad odor particularly in academic situations, I think. Postmodernism led us down a hole that didn't allow for the spiritual, it was a bad odor. And of course for all of those painters, the Color Field artists, those artists that were dealing with the transcendental, the spiritual kind of fell out of favor for that period of time. But I think that people are much broader than that now, that they're much more welcoming to all kinds of content. If it's like the Postmodernists, a literal content or whatever, I think the spiritual is once again accepted the same as beauty is. I think we are fortunate as artists today that we aren't buttonholed like we were during that period of time.