

JORGE TACLA IN CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE WESCHLER

The conversation that follows (condensed from a considerably longer exchange) focuses on a particular subset of themes that run through the career of the remarkable Chilean artist Jorge Tacla. It makes no attempt at being exhaustive, nor does it aim to provide anything like a full biographical overview (for more on which, see other contributions to this catalog).

Tacla was born in 1958 in Santiago, his father's parents having hailed from Syria (Homs and Damascus) around 1910, and his mother's from Palestine (Jerusalem and Bethlehem) around the same time, all part of a large influx of such Arab immigrants into Chile in flight from the collapsing Ottoman empire. His father was the co-owner of a plastic manufacturing establishment; his mother was a dancer and a musician and is presently a ceramicist.

The family was relatively apolitical (though his mother was devoutly Catholic), and Jorge himself too young to really participate in the leftist upsurge around Salvador Allende. Nevertheless, the music academy he attended on afternoons during high school was downtown, right near the presidential palace of La Moneda, and many of his professors were devoted leftists.

He was with his parents in an outlying district of town the morning of September 11th, 1973, when General Augusto Pinochet's forces launched a coup by bombing La Moneda, and only witnessed the building's damage some days later. Nor was Jorge especially active in the resistance in the years thereafter, though, once he had enrolled at the Escuela de Bellas Artes of

the Universidad de Chile, majoring in painting, he enthusiastically participated in the underground bohemian scene, such as it was.

Early on, he was drawn to the work of Francis Bacon, though he could only experience it in reproduction, and it was in part to be able to experience his art first-hand that he visited New York in 1979, and then moved there in 1981. After that he caromed back and forth between New York and Chile: he was in Santiago for the terrible earthquake of 1985, and he also spent some months, on a Guggenheim Fellowship, in the remote and desolate Atacama Desert near the Bolivian border. He continues to maintain art studios in both New York and Santiago.

Delighted at being offered a chance to interview this artist whose work I had been following for some time, I arrived at his fourth-floor walk-up studio (roughly between Times Square and the New York Public Library) carrying a folder of passages from various poets and writers whose writings I felt might prove pertinent. We made our way through a maze of stacked canvases to a long table in a back room, where I set up my tape recorder, and we began:

Lawrence Weschler: For the purposes of this conversation, Jorge, I'd like to zero in on a particular subset of your production, which is to say the paintings of devastation, of rubble, of razed buildings and razed relationships (as in, for example, the beds). We might note that during the late eighties and early nineties, you had already done some images of cratered buildings

in response to your experience of that terrible Chilean earthquake in 1985, for which you had been present.

Jorge Tacla: Yes, that was the Algarrobo quake, off the coast of Valparaíso, which was a very bad one, with a reading of 8.0. Of course, earthquakes in Chile happen so regularly and with such violence, the whole world reeling and shaking and coming undone, that they have become a deep part of the collective memory. This sense of—what is the opposite of gravity?—of *vertigo*. The mausoleums of cemeteries knocked over—even the dead not spared. I subsequently did some images of mausoleums. But just generally: buildings with their facades, the wires and piping all tangled and exposed.

LW: Like the sinews of a body.

JT: Exactly, and for me there is always this reference back and forth: the anatomy of buildings standing in for the anatomy of the body. For that matter, I feel like I keep an entire earth within myself.

LW: Your comments remind me of the late great American *émigré* sociologist Peter L. Berger, who co-wrote *The Social Construction of Reality*¹ and other books. He was born in Vienna in 1929, such that he was a teenager as the war was ending, and somewhere he recalls how it was the experience of walking thorough bombed-out cities at the end of the war, the rubble-strewn streets, the facades of buildings stripped off to reveal the mundane lives being lived within, dangling living rooms, exposed bathrooms and so forth, family portraits on the back walls of wind-blown second-floor bedrooms, that first sensitized him to the secret life of the everyday and set him on the road to becoming a sociologist.

JT: Yes, indeed, I can relate to that.

LW: On the other hand, during the early nineties, you yourself seemed to turn for a period to the depiction of “intact” buildings (though perhaps we would only think of them as such, as “intact,” in the context of what was to follow)—which is to say certain sorts of buildings as sites of power.

JT: Yes, precisely. I was interested in the topology of power. In portraying buildings like cathedrals and Wall Street headquarters and prisons, the FBI Headquarters and the Pentagon, I was trying to figure out how one might suggest or convey the outside and the inside at the same time, or one in terms of the other. A building represents something from the outside and then you go inside and it makes a different, or supposedly different, sort of demand. The Pentagon, for example, which is so huge on the outside, is this supposed fortress of democracy, but when you go inside you yourself are expected to become tiny and keep quiet. Or a cathedral: this magnificent call up to the divine, where when you go inside you are expected to become hushed, at most to bow down and pray. Or a prison, with its panoptical surveillance. I was trying to figure out a way to portray the exteriors, and in some cases the interiors, of buildings in such a way as to render such power dynamics naked. In some cases, I was even using sand in my paint, sand which was carried over from my earlier depictions of the Atacama, to suggest the aridness and the existential solitude of the desert transposed onto these scenes.

LW: And then in 1995, on April 19th, the Federal Building in Oklahoma City was blown up by native-born right-wing American extremists. Where were you?

JT: Here in New York City. I was watching TV, grabbing up newspapers, magazines, everything I could find.

LW: It must have blown your mind.

JT: Absolutely.

LW: After all, this was the very realization of your subject in the world. What you had been striving after, metaphorically, was being made manifest, rendered explicit.

JT: Exactly. The inside and the outside collapsed into one another. The exterior walls torn away to reveal the interior. Not to speak of the agonizing human toll.

LW: The entire image, when you soon thereafter took to painting a version, is rendered all the more vertiginous, because, for a moment, the viewer has a hard time getting his or her bearings, it's hard to tell where one is with relation to the devastation...

JT: Which has only just happened.

LW: And, it's as if one is floating in mid-air—a God's eye perch perhaps, or is it that one has just oneself been hurled out of the building? A sense of vertigo that of course wends back to your stories about having experienced earthquakes in Chile. But at the time, when you were watching the bombing's aftermath on TV, were you yourself also harkening back to the bombing of La Moneda, as well, to imagery of the wars in the Middle East, Assad Senior's devastation of Homs in Syria in 1982, for example, and the Lebanese Civil War throughout the eighties, with the Israeli occupation of Beirut and the resultant Palestinian massacres, also in 1982?

JT: Yes, of course. But it also struck me at the time, almost immediately, the idea that *this is the beginning*, this is what we are going to be seeing more and more of from here on out.

LW: This may be the moment for me to tell you a story about how I react to some of your work, those Oklahoma

City paintings and the others of buildings and ruins that were to follow. One of the things that is fascinating when you look at Vermeer, for example, is the way that, while he was hardly the first artist to be using a camera obscura, there was clearly something different in the way that he used it; he became fascinated by the distortions that showed up when you used it, the little halations, the bubbles of light, and so forth, and he made a point of including those. And I have the sense that, as a result, part of the power of a Vermeer painting is that it's not just that you are looking, say, at a woman by herself who is unaware that she's being looked at, but the image takes on the feeling of the deeply impressed memory of what it had once been like to come upon such a woman by herself. You are somehow looking at the *memory* of what that had looked like.

JT: Yes.

LW: That is why Proust is so blown away by Vermeer. The image looks like a memory.

JT: It is very much how memory looks. Yes.

LW: And Vermeer achieves that effect, it seems to me, by marshalling the blurriness of the camera projection. Similarly, it seems to me that with your paintings of ruins and rubble, one association is with the image as mediated by way of an out-of-focus television, or a television with a bad antenna. A sort of clouded or pixelated immediacy. And, indeed, standing in front of one of them—say, the one of the Oklahoma City aftermath—I find myself wondering whether your own associations were running to memories (Homs, Shatila, La Moneda), or rather, more like the Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner*, where the blurriness exists to suggest an indistinct sign of things to come. Nightmare, thus, as memory or as premonition?

JT: Both, really. My own prior history perhaps having rendered me more sensitive or receptive to those future implications.

LW: It's interesting in this context the way that for example your 1995 painting of the Pentagon as seen from the air so uncannily seems to anticipate the events of September 2001. Were you already thinking of the Pentagon as a target, or at any rate as vulnerable, when you first painted it?

JT: Yes! Absolutely. And it's stranger still, because the year before 9/11, in 2000, I did an exhibition in an uptown gallery here in New York, and there was one painting called *Dangerous Enterprise*, which featured a towering building down around Wall Street, with anticipatory rubble tumbling down from its highest stories, and there was another big painting called *Meat Carrier* of the inside of a plane cockpit.

LW: All of which in turn reminds me of Jennifer Egan's novel, *Look at Me*,² which was published literally the day before 9/11, on September 10th, 2001, and included a detailed subplot about a cell of Arab would-be terrorists, pining away their days in hiding somewhere in American suburbia (a depiction so accurate that she got a call from the FBI, even though hers had been a feat of sheerest imagination). I'm also reminded of the BBC documentarian Adam Curtis's demonstration, in his collaboration a few years back with the band Massive Attack at the Park Avenue Armory in New York, of the way the assault on the Twin Towers on 9/11 had been anticipated by literally dozens of similar visualizations in Hollywood disaster movies over the decade immediately preceding the attack. Indeed, his suggestion is that that is where Al Qaeda may well have gotten the idea. It's as if there was something in the air.

JT: Yes, indeed.

LW: Which in turn renders all the more remarkable your subsequent treatment of the attack itself. By the way, were you here in New York when it happened?

JT: Yeah. I was taxiing back and forth between my home on East 50th to my daughter's school to drop her off, and then traveled to my studio on 32nd near the Empire State Building. The crowds were pouring uptown. At first, I didn't know what it was, but once I found out, I returned to my daughter's school to pick her up...

LW: So you were actually in Santiago on the morning of September 11th, 1973, the day Pinochet bombed La Moneda at the start of his CIA-backed coup, and then in New York on September 11th, 2001, the day Al Qaeda went after the Twin Towers.

JT: Yes, I was in both places. And almost immediately, in the days thereafter, people started saying to me, "The rubble! It's just like in your paintings."

LW: Which, and this is what I was starting to say, renders all the more remarkable the fact that when you eventually did take on the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers in a series of paintings the following year, you chose not to portray the rubble there but rather...

JT: A drifting cloud against the clear blue sky, a cloud of drifting smoke.

LW: An image far more poignant and powerful in its way than just another view of rubble—certainly within the context of your wider body of work. (Though Joel Meyerowitz, for example, the photographer best known for his pastoral light and landscape vistas, chose to honor the same aftermath with an equally powerful series, within

the context of his body of work, creating several months' worth of sublime color-photographic documentation, precisely, of the ensuing rubble.)³ Your cloud paintings in turn remind me of the story a friend of mine told me about sailing out on Monterey Bay in California when the big Santa Cruz earthquake struck (back to earthquakes!). He said that, being on the water, he couldn't really feel the quake itself, but watched in astonishment as the quake shook the town of Santa Cruz to its very foundations, as presently a big cloud of dust rose up over the entire place, as if it had been a shaken rug. But coming back to those clouds of yours: *All that is solid melting into air*, right there before our eyes. The title you gave this upcoming show of yours in Santiago.

JT: Well, actually, the curator, my friend Christian Viveros-Fauné, chose that title.

LW: But you don't object?

JT: Not at all.

LW: Good. Because that in turn launched me into a whole other trill of associations, thinking about the wider body of your work on ruin and rubble and the aftermath of devastation, work which of course resumed and was amplified years later in your *Hidden Identities* series. Because of course the phrase is...

JT: Karl Marx's, from the *Communist Manifesto*.

LW: And the actual passage runs:

*"All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away..."*⁴

This is about the sheer thrust, the incredible dynamism of capitalism. One thing that is always so remarkable

about the *Communist Manifesto* is that, in addition to everything else, it's an almost breathless ode to the power of capitalism. Setting aside all the human wreckage that its onslaught entails—in addition to being horrified by all that—Marx is clearly in awe. It's an incredible thing to watch.

*"All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify..."*⁵

They get old before they can be born...

*"All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind..."*⁶

That's where that phrase comes from.

JT: Yes.

LW: But what strikes me thinking about those lines—and this goes back to La Moneda—is that the great phrase that people kept bandying about during the Reagan years, and earlier, with Kissinger under Nixon, was this notion of capitalism as a force of "creative destruction." The phrase is their hero's, the mid-century *émigré* economist Joseph Schumpeter's, but he in turn became a hero to folks like Milton Friedman and others associated with the so-called Chicago School, gurus in turn of Pinochet, too; and when Kissinger interfered in Chile's affairs to overthrow Allende, it was all in the spirit of "Sure, we have to bust stuff up for globalization to succeed, but it is all going to be worth it." "Creative destruction!" There's that great phrase of the Uruguayan chronicler at the time, Eduardo Galeano, who noted how, "In Latin America, people were in prison so that prices could be free."⁷ But all of it—Schumpeter,

Friedman, Kissinger, Kirkpatrick, Reagan—they're all in retrospect playing off of Marx. The same Marx who, a few years after the *Communist Manifesto* in the *Grundrisse*, noted how:

*“These contradictions lead to explosions, cataclysms, crises, in which a momentous suspension of labor and annihilation of great portions of capital violently lead it back to the point where it is enabled to go on, fully employing its productive powers without committing suicide. Capitalism has to destroy to make room for things to get bigger.”*⁸

JT: That's it... that's fantastic... it needs to make room “for things to get bigger.”

LW: Which in turn is playing off Nietzsche:

*“If a temple is to be erected, a temple must be destroyed. That is the law. Let anyone who can show me a case in which it is not fulfilled, do so.”*⁹

Or for that matter the anarchist Bakunin:

*“The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!”*¹⁰

This notion is just all over the place with those people.

JT: Yes...

LW: But it seems to me that it has everything to do with what you are doing, too.

JT: Indeed, it is at the root of much of my own thinking process.

LW: But that makes me want to go a little bit deeper into this notion of you, too, as a destroyer. First of all, one of the ironies here is that when people ordinarily

invoke “creative destruction,” what they are evoking is blowing up and sweeping away actual buildings, actual institutions. Whereas, as a creative destroyer, you are doing just the opposite.

JT: Precisely, yes, the opposite.

LW: You are taking a blank canvas and painting, creating destruction. While an ecstatic capitalist, say an Ayn Rand, would glory in destroying things in order to build other things, you...

JT: I build destruction.

LW: You paint destruction, you create destruction. So, it is kind of a weird flip of the ordinary usage.

JT: With wreckage, too, as a kind of landscape.

LW: But I guess what I am trying to get at... is all of this for you a sort of dirge, is it all done in the spirit of a mourning? Or are you, too, to an extent, also ecstatic in the face of all this destruction?

JT: I am attracted to it.

LW: You are attracted to it?

JT: I am drawn to, fascinated by, the psychology of all the destruction.

LW: If you couldn't be a painter, would you be a terrorist?

JT: No, that would be going too far. My concerns since my earliest days have had to do with the injustice, the insanity, the aggression in the world, and the manipulations of the same by the media. So it's ironic, because though I am consciously political, I try to do

the exact opposite of the terrorist: in the face of his monomaniacal spasm of violence (and the media's often one-dimensional instant responses), I try to slow things down and open a space for reflection.

LW: Nor would you subscribe to the Polish composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's notorious quip at the time (itself in all fairness probably misconstrued) that the Twin Towers attack was "the greatest work of art of all time."¹¹

JT: No, of course not.

LW: At the time, I myself was reminded of the lines of the great French African master Aimé Césaire:

*"Most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, and a man who wails is not a dancing bear."*¹²

JT: Agreed, and everything in my work bucks against, subverts any posture of mere spectatorship. It's just that I cannot help but also be conscious—and unconscious—of the sublimity of such scenes right alongside their horror, BOTH at the same time. It's like I said earlier about the earthquake, how at the time it rhymed with my own sense that everything is already unstable, everything is moving and crumbling all the time.

LW: So another way to put it, is you are just being descriptive. You are just describing what the world feels like.

JT: And what I feel about the world...

LW: What the world feels like to you.

JT: It feels like... it feels like we are at war the whole time.

LW: Which in turn puts me in mind of another great and celebrated passage, this time by Walter Benjamin, the one where he is riffing off a completely charming watercolor that he himself owned by his friend Paul Klee, called *Angelus Novus*. He had it over his desk, and it's funny, because when you actually see the painting, it's this charming, almost child-like cheerful painting. But Benjamin had a markedly different take on it. This is Walter Benjamin talking now:

*"A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating."*¹³

That is, he is starting to stagger back in horror.

*"His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed."*¹⁴

That's what he'd like to do.

*"But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."*¹⁵

(long silence)

Does that make sense to you?

JT: Yes. But it's more than just thinking about history as an inhuman force, or about progress and creative destruction as relentless and inevitable at the macro level.

Rather, I try to keep an open mind with regards to our own personal involvement at the level of individuals.

LW: It's interesting that you say that, because I've wondered, for example, what it is like for a Chilean to look at your La Moneda's paintings—or for that matter, for a Chilean of the Left to do so, versus a Chilean of the Right—but more generally for any Chilean as opposed to how it is for an American. For that matter, are you now an American citizen?

JT: Yes, I hold dual citizenship.

LW: Well then, like me, you bear tremendous personal responsibility for the wreckage currently being wrought on a daily basis, say, in Yemen.

JT: How so?

LW: In that our taxes directly pay for the weapons being used by the Saudis and their allies.

JT: Yes, I see, of course. But with these paintings, I also want to move from the global to the local, from the large-scale political to the intimately personal, with regards to how we all nurse hatreds and hankerings for revenge (as well as love and longing), and how we are all both victims and perpetrators, aggressed upon one day or in one facet of our lives, but then aggressors in another. That is a lot of what my more recent *Hidden Identities* paintings are about. They are about wrecked buildings but also contain more intimate sequences, for example, because individual bodies can be savaged as well. And that series begins with the empty, or rather perhaps, abandoned bed.

LW: Ah yes. I was fascinated by that painting. For, as you no doubt know, there are all sorts of artistic renderings of empty beds inviting all sorts of interpretations. Just in

recent history, one has Rauschenberg's *Bed* from 1955, one of his first "combines" and as such a precursor of Pop Art, but in its context perhaps more than anything else a youthful tweak at the previous abstract expressionist generation's claims to authenticity—as if Rauschenberg were saying, "You want authenticity, I'll give you authenticity, this is an actual authentic bed!" But then, for example, there is also Diana Michener's photo of an abandoned bed, which looks very much like yours, actually, though hers seems to be about the dailyness of marriage in some way. Or the great AIDS activist (and victim) Félix González-Torres's bed with two pillows, which if anything reminds me more of your drifting cloud images after 9/11, something airy, a comfort on the far side of suffering and death perhaps. And then there's yours, which to me anyway has suggestions of the bed as battlefield, or even, with that fault line running through it, of seismic dislocation.

JT: It's interesting that you see it that way, because I saw that painting as the first in a triptych, which took inspiration from the famous case of Marcia Merino, a.k.a., "la flaca Alejandra," a Leftist activist, who was kidnapped during the Pinochet years and brutally tortured, but somehow fell in love with her torturer and shifted to the other side. This is what I mean by the back-and-forth between victims and perpetrators.

LW: That in turn reminds me—maybe it's because of my earlier invocation of Félix González-Torres—of a remarkable poem by Marie Howe, about the last time she had dinner with her AIDS-stricken brother:

"The last time we had dinner together in a restaurant with white tablecloths, he leaned forward

*and took my two hands in his hands and said,
I'm going to die soon. I want you to know that.*

*And I said, I think I do know.
And he said, What surprises me is that you don't*

*And I said, I do. And he said, What?
And I said, Know that you're going to die.*

*And he said, No, I mean know that you are.*¹⁶

JT: Wow. “That you are.” That they both are. That we all will. But it’s the same, and this is what I try to keep an open mind about, with all these interpenetrating dualities.

LW: “*Mon semblable, mon frère.*”

JT: Which is what *Hidden Identities* is exploring, as was much of my earlier work, too, I now realize. The secrets, the manipulations, the evasions, and the guilt.

LW: I’d like to shift now slightly to speak with you about how you achieve some of your effects. Because you seem to be navigating a dangerous precipice—not just portraying one. And that is the seduction of beauty. Because there is an apocalyptic sublime, as it were, associated with much of this sort of imagery. The way for example that, notwithstanding the horror, we can’t stop looking at those old newsreels of the blooming mushroom clouds welling up from nuclear tests: they’re just so—say it!—beautiful. In the first of his *Duino Elegies*, Rilke famously contends that:

*“Beauty is nothing but the beginning of a terror
we can only just barely endure
and we admire it so
because it calmly disdains to destroy us.”*¹⁷

There are many translations, that’s just my composite. But the next line almost harkens back to the Benjamin, for Rilke goes on to say, “Every angel is terrible.”

Or perhaps better, “terrifying.” The point in this context being that the beauty is enthralling, absorbing, transfixing, entrapping. That vertigo again.

JT: Yes, but I don’t want to get stuck at the beauty in these paintings. I want to undermine that sense as well, to make it more complicated for the viewer, to raise up his or her sense of complicity.

LW: You want to disconcert, as it were—is that a word in Spanish? Does it have the same connotation: to dis-concert. To upend the easy harmonies.

JT: Yes, exactly.

LW: Which brings up another aspect of your method, going back to your days as a music student perhaps. For these wrecked buildings, at least on the surface, at the level of paint on canvas, look like crumpled, mashed-up musical scores: the horizontal slashes, the collapsing verticals, the scattershot of pointed details.

JT: I think you are right. They are organized as if on scales.

LW: And like atonal music, the images both pull us in and push us back, back and away and back onto ourselves.

JT: Yes.

LW: But producing such effects belies the chaos it portrays: it requires of you the artist a formidable technical precision. And here I am reminded of another poem, this one by the contemporary American poet Linda Gregg, from her collection *Things and Flesh* (now, there’s a title for you—she got it from a line by Camus she uses as epigraph for her collection: “This book should be heavy with things and flesh”), and in fact the first poem in that collection of hers is entitled *The Precision*:

“There is a modesty in nature. In the small of it and in the strongest. The leaf moves just the amount the breeze indicates and nothing more. In the power of lust, too, there can be a quiet and clarity, a fusion of exact moments. There is a silence of it inside the thundering. And when the body swoons, it is because the heart knows its truth. There is directness and equipoise in the fervor, just as the greatest turmoil has precision. Like the discretion a tornado has when it tears down building after building, house by house. It is enough, Kafka said, that the arrow fit exactly into the wound that it makes. I think about my body in love as I look down on these lavish apple trees and the workers moving with skill from one to the next, singing.”¹⁸

JT: Wow, that is a great, great poem.

LW: But do you see what I mean, about how it pertains to your paintings? “The quiet and the clarity.” “The fusion of exact moments.” “The silence of it inside the thundering.” Your paintings remind me in that last context a bit of Jackson Pollock’s and how critics, when his drip paintings first began appearing, kept keying off on their silence, which was odd, because of course they were silent—they were paintings!—but I think the critics were being struck by a sort of galactic silence—all these gestures exploding as if in the vacuum of far outer space—whereas yours suggest the tinkling aftermath of a terrible explosion that has only just occurred.

JT: Only just occurred. But that business, too, about the hurricane...

LW: “The discretion a tornado has when it tears down building after building.”

JT: Yes.

LW: The key word there being “discretion.” I once had a professor who noted that for St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine Order, the primary virtue of any monk was “discretion,” and he wondered what Benedict could have meant by that, concluding that it must have had something to do with the Latin origin of the word, *dis-excretio*, which is to say the ability to know the difference between food and shit.

JT: How one thing is linked with the other one.

LW: Precisely, in that one becomes the other, but the latter is also necessary, as fertilizer, in even making the former possible. Discretion being the ability to know the place of each—literally: you don’t eat shit—a sense of proper relation.

JT: Each thing in its place.

LW: Even after an explosion. It strikes me that these paintings inhabit a zone somewhere between two of T. S. Eliot’s most famous aphorisms: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (from near the end of *The Waste Land*), on the one hand, and “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (from his poem *Gerontion*), on the other: both products of the years immediately after the First World War. And in the context of the latter in particular, I’m also reminded of another ode to precision, this one by the great Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, composed in his case in the wake of the Second World War and the Stalinist repressions that followed it in his homeland, where, faced with the contention on the part of many that the horrors were so incomprehensibly vast that they should just be forgotten—what’s the point of remembering?—Herbert, speaking in the guise of his alter ego, *Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision*, countered:

*“And yet in these matters
accuracy is essential
we must not be wrong
even by a single one*

*we are despite everything
the guardians of our brothers*

*ignorance about those who have disappeared
undermines the reality of the world.”¹⁹*

Strange, though, that last phrase in the context of your paintings, which in one reading could be seen as an act of witness—and one by a painter whose country has seen its own surfeit of history.

JT: You mean certain kinds of ignorance “undermining the reality of the world”?

LW: Yes, precisely, because in another sense, your work is all about complicating any simple act of witness or remembrance. You speak of vertigo; “undermining” is what you are all about. Far from being photorealistic renditions of wreckage, your paintings are if anything surrealistic. The reality of experience comes up for grabs.

JT: But not in a simple way. Because at such moments, this is what reality in fact feels like.

LW: Granted. But as against Herbert’s contention, one might consider a passage from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from 1945, also just after the Second World War, in an essay entitled *La Guerre a eu lieu* (mistranslated as *The War Has Taken Place*, whereas it literally means, “The War Has Had a Place”):

“We have learned history and we claim that it must not be forgotten. But are we here not the dupes of our own emotions?”

In 10 years when we reread these pages and so many others, what will we think of them? We do not want this year, 1945, to become just another year among many. A man who has lost his Son or the woman he loved does not want to live beyond that loss. He leaves the house in the state that it was in.”²⁰

That last applying to you: “leaves the house in the state that it was in.”

“The familiar objects upon the table. The clothes in the closet mark an empty place in the world. The day will come however when the meaning of these things will change. Once they were wearable and now they are out of date. They are shabby and out of style. To keep them any longer it would not make the dead person live on, quite the opposite. They date his death all the more cruelly.”²¹

Pretty amazing passage.

JT: Amazing. But it is true: with time, they end up blowing up the ruins to make room for new buildings. And we all become complicit in that.

LW: But your paintings get to stand as a sort of marker along yet another precarious border, in this case somewhere between Herbert and Merleau-Ponty.

LW: In closing though, thank you, Jorge, for letting me subject you to what I realize must seem a veritable torrent of literary and historical associations. I just wanted to give you a sense of some of the things that your paintings had raised up in me. But in no sense was I intending to suggest that these various citations should serve, as it were, as captions to your paintings, as crude exhaustions of their meaning. That’s always a danger when you set, say, a poem beside a painting. Your paintings seem to me, first and

foremost, mysterious, self-contained, sovereign.
Response can only be tentative, approximate, fugitive.

Which in turn reminds me—one last passage, if I may, and may I offer this one in the spirit of a parting gift—from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s notebooks, his own advice on how to situate oneself in the face of a landscape (and perhaps, in our context, in the presence of an upcoming exhibition of paintings):

“I have before now experienced that the best way to get a vivid impression and feeling of a landscape is to sit down before it and read, or become otherwise absorbed in thought;

for then, when our eyes happen to be attracted to the landscape, you seem to catch Nature at unawares, and see her before she has time to change her aspect. The effect lasts but for a single instant, and passes away almost as soon as you are conscious of it; but it is real for that moment. It is as if you could overhear and understand what the trees are whispering to one another; as if you caught a glimpse of a face unveiled, which veils itself from every willful glance. The mystery is revealed, and, after a breath or two, becomes just as great a mystery as before.”²²

JT: Lovely. Thank you.

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