BRIAN DICKERSON

CONSTRUCTED PAINTINGS

BRIAN DICKERSON: CONSTRUCTED PAINTINGS

July 13–August 5, 2011

KOUROS gallery
23 East 73rd Street NY, NY 10021
tel 212-288-5888 fax 212-794-9397
camillos@kourosgallery.com
www.kourosgallery.com

www.briandickersonart.com

"I destroy things every day in the act of working
and often recall a picture I had considered finished
in order to rework it."

Frank Auerbach

Reflections on the Paintings of Brian Dickerson

Eve Bowen

Several years ago, Brian Dickerson carried an original serigraph of one of Ad Reinhardt's *Black Paintings* into the woods of the Helderberg Mountains in upstate New York and hung it on a tree. He wanted to see what would happen if he juxtaposed the rigid geometry of Reinhardt's minimalist square with the forms that are found in nature.

Dickerson had first encountered Reinhardt's work on a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City when he was sixteen years old. "I distinctly remember turning the corner of one gallery and being confronted by what first appeared to be

Untitled I, *2010*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 32 x 23 x 7 inches

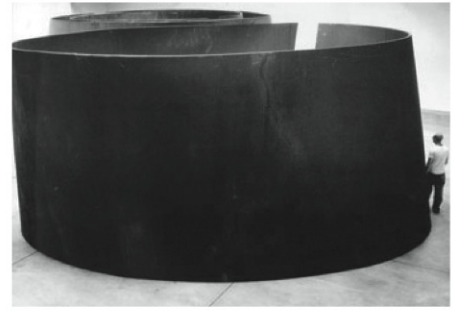
a monochromatic black square," Dickerson says. "It completely changed my idea of what a painting was or could be." For Dickerson, Reinhardt's five-by-five-foot work in the museum, with its subtle gradations of differently hued shades of black, "struck an emotional chord that I hadn't experienced before through a painting. It seemed to give a visual voice to the darker memories of growing up. I remember feeling confused, agitated, probably a bit hostile. But I couldn't deny the effect that painting had on me."

Dickerson grew up in the small town of Middleburgh, New York, about an hour west of Albany, where the Helderberg escarpment cuts through the agricultural landscape of the Schoharie Valley. When he was six, his thirteen-year-old brother Noel drowned in a fishing accident. He has rarely talked about his brother's death publicly, but it has influenced his entire body of work. "I remember seeing a film on Andrew Wyeth and his comment on the death of his father and the effect it had on his art," says Dickerson. "Wyeth said, 'The death of someone, especially someone very close to you, gives you something that you can't get any other way.' That is brutally true." Dickerson adds, "It's been a struggle to accept the consequences of my brother's death as it relates to my art. I'm certain I would not be doing what I'm doing today were it not for what happened."

Long before he began to make the abstract three-dimensional paintings that he is known for—the most recent of which are on view at Kouros Gallery in New York City this summer—Dickerson painted landscapes. These works, he says, "tended to be dark nocturnal landscapes of the Helderberg region painted

Serigraph of Ad Reinhardt's Black Painting
hanging in the woods of the Helderberg Mountains, upstate New York

in a traditional format of foreground, middle ground, and background." However, in the early 1990s, influenced by artists like Michael Heizer, whose land art piece *Double Negative* consists of two enormous trenches cut into the edge of the Mormon Mesa in the Nevada desert northeast of Las Vegas, together measuring 1,500 feet long, fifty feet deep, and thirty feet wide, Dickerson began to shift in a new direction. "I was particularly drawn to the concept of 'imagined space,'" he explains, "as most people experience works like *Double Negative* not through actually being in their physical presence but through archival photographs, and therefore have to enter them through their imagination." Dickerson was also drawn to the sculptures of Richard Serra, in particular his *Torqued Ellipses*: made of bent steel twelve to thirteen feet high, each of these elliptical structures has an opening that allows viewers to step into its interior and "physically enter the work."



At the same time, Dickerson was continuing to think about the landscape of his childhood near the Helderberg escarpment, where he and his wife had since built a summer cottage, and of his experience at age fourteen of witnessing the excavation of an Owasco Indian settlement site in the area. "I remember very vividly peering into the pits and other excavated areas, the colored layers of soil, and the various artifacts, including the remains of a dog that was buried," Dickerson says. "This made a big impression on me. I identified with the process of archaeology, particularly

Bottom left: Michael Heizer, Double Negative, *1969*
Top right: Richard Serra, Torqued Ellipse II, *1996*

the layers involved, of removing layers that were earlier deposited, the role of intuition, burial, the past, what is known and unknown."

It was at this time that Dickerson began to bring elements from abstract art, sculpture, and painting together into one new form—the three-dimensional works that became his *Helderberg* and *Settlement Paintings* of the mid-2000s. Done primarily on wood and usually measuring no more than two to five feet per side, these "constructed paintings" evoke landscapes through their earthy palettes, weathered textures, and architectural elements, while their forms remain geometric and abstract. Each extends out from the wall by several inches and con-

Myosotis, *2010*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood
27 x 31 x 11 inches

tains a small three-dimensional aperture of some kind, which, as Dickerson explains, "allows or invites the viewer to enter into the painting but also, by its size, limits the ability to do so physically." The viewer is "left to enter through his or her own imagination, memory, or experience." In these paintings, Dickerson seems to have reconfigured the experience of placing Reinhardt's black serigraph in the forest, transforming his own memories of physical and emotional landscapes into beautiful and mysterious abstract works on wood.

Of his paintings, Dickerson says, "I suppose it's easy to begin reading them as related to landscape. And that is probably true especially for the earlier work." However, at their core, Dickerson's paintings have to do with loss. "It's something I've dealt with in one form or another for as long as I can remember," he says. Indeed, the surfaces of Dickerson's paintings show numerous traces of wearing down, weathering, and scarring. All have been heavily worked and reworked. Even the constructions themselves have been dismantled and rebuilt in different ways.

Autumn's End, *2005*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 36 x 39 x 4 inches

The fact that Dickerson begins his constructions not with found pieces of aged wood but with smooth plywood sheets bought at a local lumber yard may come as a surprise. First he creates a simple wood frame with a plywood panel for a surface. Next he builds the surface up with gesso, bostic, and paint, then scrapes away at what has accumulated, going back in with more paint, then carving away again, in a repeating pattern of layering and excavation. He used to include elements in his constructions that he called "artifacts"—found pieces of wood from old window frames or barns, for example—but in recent years he has stopped that practice altogether, preferring not to appropriate materials from outside

sources in order to maintain a strict integrity to his work. Instead he sometimes incorporates scraps from his own discarded paintings, giving the new paintings a collage-like quality.

For Dickerson, "The constant disassembling of once 'completed' paintings means the loss of something that once existed but has been destroyed. Still, those elements remain—albeit in other forms that have been cut, split, reassembled, and reworked." Like the German-born British artist Frank Auerbach, whose work he admires, Dickerson often spends years working on a single painting, constantly applying and then scraping off layers of paint. He explained his process for the painting *Autumn's End*—whose sister paintings *Autumn's End I* and *Autumn's End II* can be seen in the current show—in a 2005 interview with the artist Judith Perry:

> Once the construction of the work is complete, I might study it for a period of several days, weeks, or months. . . . I sometimes have a preconceived notion of what the finished work will be . . . but it

Autumn's End I, *2010*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 31 x 21 x 5 inches

> usually ends up going in a different direction. For example, [*Autumn's End*] started in very bright yellows and reds. I then begin to build up layers and textures. Inevitably things don't go as planned and I'll scrape the underlying paint layers away. Sometimes I use paint scrapers, but at other times I end up using a heat gun or sander. . . . As the work progresses the initial shapes and forms begin to change visually because of the addition of color. I also tend to reconsider some of the shapes I first started with. So it was with this one I ended up sawing through different pieces, taking apart certain sections and reassembling others.

At first glance, it may seem that Dickerson's palette tends toward the monochromatic: several of his works, such as *Vroman Cross*, feature dominant panels of deep gray, while others have large swaths of dark brown, autumnal ocher, or snowy white.

Autumn's End II, *2011*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 42 x 21 x 9 inches

The bright undercoats of paintings like *Autumn's End* may initially appear to have been lost in the finished work. However, closer examination of the surfaces of Dickerson's paintings reveals not just textural subtleties but also traces of color as rich and startling as the chemically saturated hues of green, teal, and cobalt that appear in the work of the photographer David Maisel, who captured them in his extraordinary images of the corroded exteriors of decomposing copper canisters containing unidentified human ashes at an Oregon psychiatric hospital, collected in his recent book *Library of Dust*.

"I've always been intrigued by the *Isenheim Altarpiece*," says Dickerson, referring to the early-sixteenth-century altarpiece by the German artist Matthias Grünewald, now in the collection of the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France. "Not in the way someone like Jasper Johns appropriated the outlines of certain figures to incorporate into his own work," Dickerson explains. "What I

Settlement No. 5, *2008*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 30 x 25 x 10 inches

think is so powerful is the function of the altarpiece. That people suffering or dying from the plague had the opportunity to gaze upon the imagery to help guide them through their suffering."

Dickerson happens to share his admiration for the *Isenheim Altarpiece* with the German writer W. G. Sebald, whose extended prose poem *After Nature* contains a section based loosely on the life of Grünewald, and with a character from Sebald's *The Emigrants*: Max Ferber, a fictional artist whom Sebald modeled on none other than Frank Auerbach. For Sebald, whose narratives often revolve elliptically around the Holocaust, finding a form for expressing loss is central to his literary projects. In *The Emigrants*, he gives a description of Ferber's artistic process that could almost be a gloss on Dickerson's:

> When I watched Ferber working on one of his portrait studies over a number of weeks,

Winter Solstice, *2009*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 24 x 24 x 8 inches

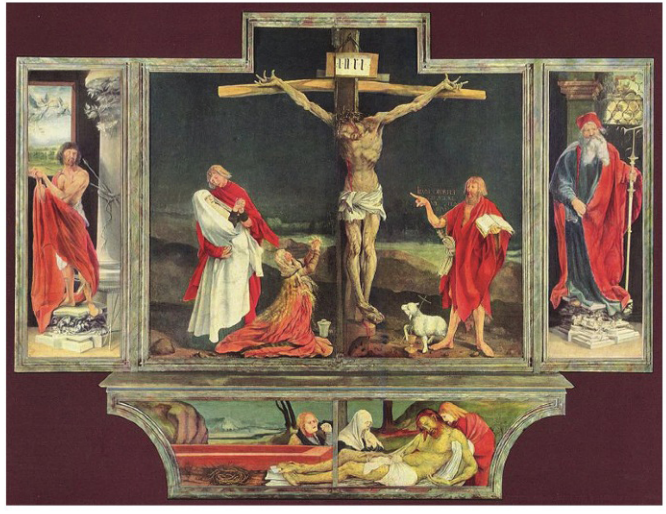
I often thought that his prime concern was to increase the dust [in his studio]. He drew with vigorous abandon, frequently going through half a dozen of his willow-wood charcoal sticks in the shortest of time; and that process of drawing and shading on the thick, leathery paper, as well as the concomitant business of constantly erasing what he had drawn with a woollen rag already heavy with charcoal, really amounted to nothing but a steady production of dust, which never ceased except at night. Time and again I marvelled to see that Ferber, with the few lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation, had created a portrait of great vividness. And all the more did I marvel when, the following morning, . . . he would erase the portrait yet again, and once more set about excavating the features of his model. . . . He might reject as many as forty variants, or smudge them back into the paper and

Vroman Cross, *2011*
Oil and mixed media on canvas with wood, 52 1/2 x 31 x 6 1/2 inches

> overdraw new attempts upon them; and if he then decided that the portrait was done, not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion, an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper.

At one point Ferber, a German-born Jewish refugee who survived the Holocaust but whose parents did not, recounts a rare pilgrimage he made from his Manchester studio to Colmar:

> For a very long time I had wanted to see Grünewald's Isenheim paintings, which were often in my mind as I worked, and especially the "Entombment of Christ." . . . The extreme vision of that strange man, which was lodged in every detail, distorted every limb, and infected the colours like an illness,



Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece, *depicting the* Crucifixion *above and the* Entombment *below, 1512–1515*

> was one I had always felt in tune with, and now I found my feeling confirmed by the direct encounter. The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death,

> rose and ebbed within me like a tide. Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witnesses to the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced—consciousness—and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come.

Dickerson, who was raised Protestant, made early pilgrimages of his own after his brother died, constructing small wooden crosses that he painted with shellac and brought as offerings to his brother's grave. "The cross as object is in much of what I do now," he says, referring to the formations that appear in several of the works in the current show, including *Vroman Cross*

Roseboom, *2011*
Oil and mixed media on canvas with wood, 71 x 31 x 6 1/2 inches

and *Roseboom*. But, as Dickerson points out, "the crosses in these paintings are fractured, broken, sometimes upside down and with what appear to be reliquaries or openings."

Even though his work contains religious allusions, some of which are subversive, Dickerson doesn't intend for his paintings to be viewed as religious objects. "Lest you think they are about a violent reaction to our violent history and the religious mechanisms we put in place to justify it," he says, "the work is also quiet and in some respects peaceful. At the end of the day the paintings are, I would hope, 'hopeful.'" Referring to the apertures in each of his works, Dickerson says, "these are places for viewers to gaze into and find or search for their own meaning. I have my own thoughts when I contemplate what is in those unknown spaces. Sometimes it's a vivid memory—at other times it's knowing that there will always be an unknown. It's just a search."

In 2009 and 2010, Dickerson traveled to the seacoast village of Ballycastle in County Mayo, Ireland, for a pair of residencies at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation. It was a four-mile walk from his cottage to his studio in the village, and for Dickerson these walks became one of the most important parts of being there. He would find himself thinking about which path to take, and how different paths lead to different connections, perhaps even to a different life.

Dickerson's daily walks often took him past the Doonfeeny Graveyard, where he encountered a remarkable archaeological

Standing stone, Ballycastle, County Mayo, Ireland

monument: a Bronze Age standing stone. Believed to be more than three thousand years old, it stands twenty-two feet high and is nine inches thick; its depth below-ground is not known. Carved into its surface are two crosses, added in the late sixth or early seventh century. In the presence of this stone monument and others in the area—including a shorter, squatter stone in the nearby village of Killala whose surface was inscribed centuries ago with a text in ogham, the early Irish alphabet, sections of which have long since become indecipherable—Dickerson felt deeply affected by some of the same associations that had arisen from his boyhood visit to the Owasco Indian site: the depositing of layers of sediment and their later removal, the mystery of burial, what is known and unknown. "These were some of the qualities that made the 'discovery' of the standing stones in Ireland so important to me."

Ballinglen Cross *(top left) and* Ogham *(bottom right)*
From the Ballinglen Drawings, *2009*
Graphite on paper, each 14 x 11 inches

During his first residency at Ballinglen, Dickerson made drawings every day. "When I came home to Philadelphia," he says, "I put them away in a box and didn't look at them for several months." When he revisited them later, he recalls, "it was like reading a daily diary. I remembered particular days when they were done and the various feelings and events that accompanied them." Crosses feature in many of the drawings in various forms, as do the standing stones. In his *Ballinglen Drawings*, it is possible to see Dickerson's explorations of burial as he renders both the parts of the standing stones that are visible above-ground and the parts that extend into what can only be imagined space below, hidden in the depths of the earth.

Each of the *Ballinglen Drawings* is done in graphite on its own sheet of heavy white paper, and is surrounded by a substantial amount of white space. There are two drawings in particular from the series that Dickerson thinks of as companion pieces—as he describes them, they are "very subtle and light, and some passages, which happen to be the most important, would be lost in any reproduction." He thinks of them as "whispers." While each of these delicate drawings floats alone in its own pool of protective white space, Dickerson has mentioned that he might frame them as a pair. One can imagine each hanging on its own tree, like the Reinhardt serigraph in the woods of the Helderbergs; but these would hang side by side in their solitude, sharing the same forest.

Dickerson has introduced a different sort of pairing within two of his most recent paintings, *Roseboom* and *The Gypsy & the Troll*, both of which appear in the current show. Whereas his earlier works have never contained more than one aperture, each of these paintings has two. In the case of *The Gypsy & the Troll*,

The Gypsy & the Troll, *2006–2011*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 66 x 44 x 10 inches

Dickerson added the second aperture long after the painting was first exhibited, under a different title, in 2007. "After the exhibit closed," he says, "I began to rework the painting first by cutting about eighteen inches off one side. The surface was then reworked with multiple layers of additional paint and the first opening was reworked with the second opening added later." He has continued to rework the painting in the months leading up to the current show. He explains,

> A recent photo shows a slanted piece of wood to the left of the top opening. Something about this bothered me so one day I took a hammer to it and in a split second it was gone! The leftover piece was then attached vertically to the side of the opening. There is evidence on the surface of what was there but in its destruction it created a much better result.

It is worth mentioning that there has been a recent and significant musical influence on the evolution of *The Gypsy & the Troll*: Sergei Prokofiev's score for the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. "I was listening to it at the time of the major revisions," says Dickerson. According to him, "The surface quality and color of the painting may be referenced to the landscape but the two openings are also linked in a way that I think of as separate and distinct from the landscape." Indeed, it is possible

to imagine the linkage of the two apertures in *The Gypsy & the Troll* in very human terms—even as a call of sorts, perhaps requited,

A Gypsy Dance, *from the* Ballinglen Drawings, *2009*
Graphite on paper, 12 x 9 inches

perhaps not, from one solitary being to another to join in a pas de deux.

Of the lengthy process of creating the version of *The Gypsy & the Troll* that appears in the current show, Dickerson says,

> The end result is that it evolved over a six-year period beginning with references to landscape, reworked in anticipation of my first residency in Ireland, reworked after my return from Ireland, and ending with a variation on the story of Romeo and Juliet—with mysterious and magical characters.

"This may be another extension of the Reinhardt being placed in the woods," he muses. "Two disparate objects or places, placed together deliberately or by chance, creating an unexpected, unexplainable, or inexplicable connection. It's something I'm still working through." ✧

Untitled II, *2010*
Oil, wax, and mixed media on wood, 30 x 23 x 7 inches

Eve Bowen is a writer and a senior editor at The New York Review of Books.
She interviewed Brian Dickerson at his studio in Philadelphia in April 2011.

The illustrations on page 7 are from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Dia Art Foundation.
All other images are courtesy of Kouros Gallery.