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Charles Seliger with Phong Bui and John Yau

by John Yau and Phong Bui

On a sunny afternoon of last month, *Rail* publisher Phong Bui and art editor John Yau drove up to Mount Vernon to visit the home/studio of the painter Charles Seliger to talk about his life and work in conjunction with the current exhibit of his new paintings at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery (on view until May 13). While the three of us were sitting down for lunch after our conversation with his wife, Lenore, Seliger, in his casual and genteel manner, demonstrated an unusual gift—in a matter of less than five minutes, he duplicated all the American Presidents' signatures nearly in order from memory. The list is included here in these pages.

John Yau: The first observation I want to make is how much your work has changed. As far back as I can remember, paint has been your central medium, but you've recently been using colored pencils.

Charles Seliger: It's something I've wanted to try for a long time, to experiment and see what the results would be. I managed to prepare a surface with various mattegels and modeling paste, so that I could draw on it with colored pencils. There were limitations with pencils; you're locked into their colors and can't do very much blending. I explored it as far as I think I can go. But what I've accomplished satisfied me enough. Actually, three works in the show are made with this technique.

Yau: You've gone as far as you can with colored pencils?

Seliger: Yes, I think so. Though I may use colored pencils again, one never knows. After a show, I get the feeling I'm back in a void again; I'm still that person who doesn't know where the work will evolve. While I was using the pencils, I realized, oh, I'm disconnected from this. And I began following a new train of thought, which is what I'm involved with right now.

Yau: What is this thought?

Seliger: The approach is to use the old master technique of under-painting. I prepare a surface in black, gray and white, through a process of automatism. I really don't know where it's going to go, but I ask: where can it go? And how far can I break it down into small-scale forms? So that's what I've been doing. I've also been using this new technique where I start with just one color and then add another and another instead of doing all the colors at one time. The under-painting tells me what should be dark and what should be light. I haven't gotten a full result yet, but that's the way I like to work, just jumping in and seeing where it goes.

Yau: We should talk about automatism, because it's crucial to your process, and has been at least since the early 1940s! It's evolved with small changes, but you have always managed to find different ways to make it happen in its own terms. How would you describe your recent process of automatism?

Seliger: You're very accurate about the way it changes, because what happens is you may have a technique that works very well, but at some point you exhaust it and need to find another. While working on the monograph, Francis O'Connor asked me what I did differently during each stage of my career; he broke it down into several stages. My answer is in the monograph; all the different ways that I tried, in a sense, to sneak up on something so as to capture and develop it further. I work in one small studio where I begin with my own automatism. Basically I just work with the paint, not quite knowing where it's going to end

up. But when I hook onto something that's really interesting, I see the possibilities. Then I intensify my focus in articulating, to delineate the form or to simply develop the painting. I like the word "focus" because I really feel that I move from a sort of blurred informality to more structure.

Yau: And the structure, as you said earlier, is really breaking everything down. It's almost like seeing microscopically. To go back to automatism— if you connect it to Pollock, as the gesture that expands, you bring another idea to automatism, which is the breaking down of matter into all the parts that make up whatever matter is. Matter itself then becomes elusive because it can't be defined.

Seliger: Very well said. I became fascinated with that the very first time I read Lucretius, where there is a description of everything as atoms. How could he have concluded this? He didn't have the tools we have, but yet he saw, in the light, in the sunbeam, little particles of dust and he came to this of all conclusions. That fascinated me. At the time, even though I was involved with all the Abstract Expressionists, I wasn't content to make bold gestures and convey that type of energy. What fascinated me was the inside of the shape that you made, and then what's inside the inside of that shape. So I began that whole investigation, which many people dismissed as overly complicated paintings. They said it should be a reduction, it should be simple, it should be spontaneous and so on. I was not doing what everyone else was doing, but one thing I have in common with the Abstract Expressionists was the practice of automatism. That has remained with me to this day. However I cannot plan a painting, I cannot draw and put it down like Gorky did.

Bui: When did you come in contact with some of the Surrealists who were here in New York during the forties?

Seliger: I had just come into New York from Jersey City and I only knew Jimmy Ernst. He showed me things he was doing and told me to look at *The London Bulletin* (published by the England Surrealist group, Roland Penrose and Gordon Onslow-Ford were the two editors) to see what was going on. I remember being impressed by Matta's painting because I saw something that was unique in his vision, which I didn't see in American painting at that time. In any case I submitted a painting to one of Peggy's salons, but it was rejected. Later, her secretary, Howard Putzel, told me: "don't feel bad, it's a very fine painting," and shortly afterwards he exhibited that same painting in his gallery, the 67 Gallery. The show got a lot of attention from critics. *The New York Times* did a long write-up, my work got a fair amount of attention then.

Yau: I think sometimes history catches up with you. What I'm suggesting is that, if there is this moment in Abstract Expressionism where everything is thought to have become reductive, it seems to me that there's also its opposite, which is the belief that seeing's goal is to see what's in front of us because we know that there is more there than we actually can see. And you can think of certain artists—Bruce Conner, Stephen Westfall, Thomas Nozkowski, David Reed, James Siena, and Philip Taaffe—whose work has a complexity and simultaneity that you can't see all at once. It's not *what you see is what you see*, the Frank Stella remark, it's what you see is the beginning of seeing, come and look some more. I think within that trajectory of painting, which is the other side of the reductive impulse, that you were there all along and, in a way, your work anticipates from a different angle, the rise in both complexity and simultaneity. And the small scale, I mean some of these painters, like Nozkowski, Siena, and Bill Jensen, also work in a small scale.

Seliger: There was a recent exhibit in Washington of computer art of complex patterns. A little introduction was written which began by saying complex systems are not new to art and they quote a 1945 statement that I had made. Before I really formulated actually thinking about it, it was a very natural thing for me to look inside the shapes. It seemed like something that was yet to be looked at. Unlike what many other artists were doing at that time, Baziotes, Stamos and a few others whom I became friendly with were interested in revealing a certain organic quality in their work. I felt that they were really expressing the deeper nature of organic forms. When Pollock said, "I am nature," he was in a sense speaking for many of us.

Yau: And when you speak about the paintings telling you what to do, both you and Pollock view yourselves as conduits through which the painting comes. You are dealing with what's there—this external

thing that you lay down— and it tells you what to do. That's very different than the notion of Modernism that believes that the painter is the author, the creator, and the originator. It's more I am not the author but the receiver.

Seliger: I've heard artists and poets say it, and novelists say that their characters take over and, so yes, I'd say that is true. Pollock was certainly a good example and I think that could be applied in my case as well. Pollock liked my work and he offered to trade with me and at that time he was becoming quite known. I was a little embarrassed, so I never did it!

Yau: You must have been about eighteen then!

Seliger: Yes. I saw Pollock differently than most people. He was kind to me and admired my paintings. He was often quiet and spoke in a very low voice. I know he drank, and I know the stories, but most of the time when I saw him with Lee (Krasner) at Putzel's Gallery, he was both friendly and intense. If Putzel had lived, he would have become Pollock's dealer.

Yau: Pollock looked at a lot of painting. He was somebody who had an enormous visual appetite.

Seliger: I remember Putzel once told Pollock and myself to go across the street to the Willard Gallery, where there was an artist named Mark Tobey, whom he thought we should meet. We did just that. Incidentally, Putzel had memorized *Finnegan's Wake* and although he stuttered, when he recited the *Finnegan's Wake* his voice was perfectly normal—he recited whole pages without stuttering.

Bui: When did your friendship with Tobey begin?

Seliger: About 1950. When Marian Willard took me on. That was how I officially met him, although I'd seen him a year before. I didn't talk with him or anything; I had just seen him in the gallery. Then one day I approached him, and said, "I thought you were going to stop smoking." (*Laughter.*) And he said, "How did you know that?" I told him I'd heard him say it last year. At any rate, we became quite friendly, but I didn't show him my paintings because there is always that possibility that, although someone is close and friendly and nice to you, he'll absolutely hate your work. But one day he called me up and said "I've been visiting so and so's house and there's this little painting I leaned over to see that's just beautiful, and it's yours." That was really terrific to hear. I had a long correspondence with him after that. I still haven't met anybody with the qualities I saw in him. The thing about Tobey that I particularly liked was something we used to call "Catholic" taste—in that he liked so many different things. His view wasn't limited, which made it fun to be around him. And he had a great sense of humor.

Yau: I've never heard "Catholic" taste said of Tobey.

Seliger: He had his unique and original ideas and concepts of joining the art of the East and the West. He had very good solid ideas, but when he had his show, the retrospective, he got favorable reviews, except in Art News, edited by Thomas Hess.

Bui: That was Tobey's MOMA retrospective in 1962?

Seliger: Yeah, that was it. Hess was always annoyed that Tobey did those gouaches and watercolors because he felt they weren't in a sense "masculine" enough. So the review, which wasn't written by Hess, started out calling Tobey a "cracker-barrel philosopher." I remember walking down Madison Avenue with Tobey, reading this to him. He didn't like it of course, but also wasn't the kind to get angry, just saddened. This bothered me so much that I wrote Hess and asked: "Did you hire a hatchet man to go after Tobey? Because I have the feeling you hired someone to write this who didn't like Tobey to *begin* with." I sent that letter to him and others, and every critic wrote me back, agreeing with me about the unfairness of the whole situation. Alfred Barr came over and shook my hand for having the courage to do this, and then Hess wanted to sue me for libel. I knew a man who was an acquaintance of this woman (the reviewer), she's quite a well known person now, and he brought us together. I asked her: "Were you taken to dinner and

given this assignment to write about Tobey?" And she said it was lunch, and explained to me that she had never written a feature article before, and was assigned it, wrote it, and she felt bad afterward. Tobey could never understand why Motherwell and the others would come to his shows and never say a word. They didn't treat him nicely. One reason was that he traveled with a Swedish man and they made fun of him because of that.

Yau: Because they thought he was gay?

Seliger: Well, Tobey was, in his earlier life, but with the Swedish man it was more a friendship that began during the Depression of the 1930's.

Yau: It's interesting because Bradley Walker Tomlin was gay, and if you read the 1957 Whitney retrospective catalog you'll find two appreciations: one by Guston, and one by Motherwell, which contains this line, "he even talked to our wives." I later realized that this is really a homophobic remark. Among the Abstract Expressionists there were some that weren't homophobic, like Guston and Jack Tworkov, and there were some that were. Some of the critics from that time were probably homophobic as well.

Seliger: It was that post-war spirit when American painting became critically acclaimed and was dominating the international art scene while the School of Paris was on the retreat.

Yau: So scale would immediately be held against you and Tobey. You're working in an intimate scale, you've never really painted large-scale paintings. 52x48 is the largest one you did, and that is still almost easel scale. And there's this whole notion in the shift of the scale in reaction to the School of Paris. And there's this other side, obviously, which gets left out, that there were painters who didn't do large scale work, and in your case your work actually got smaller!

Seliger: Marian Willard's husband kept telling me to get a big brush and really paint. I said to him one day that I had a gift that was to be able to do what it is I do—I'm going to pursue what it is I do because I feel good with it! It was very hard to hold onto that—sometimes I would look at Klee just to know that there was a precedent.

Yau: Were you aware of the paintings of Forest Bess?

Seliger: I was aware of his work when he was showing at Betty Parson.

Yau: Because he's another person who works small. Did you ever meet him?

Seliger: No. I have never met him. Another thing with my work, we've talked about the influence of physics and great naturalists, but there's the East—I've read a lot of Chinese and Japanese poetry, I love using the sumi brush on my paintings. Tom Messer said an interesting thing to me at my current exhibition—your paintings come from inside you, they're very peaceful and quiet, as if you've found a way to put aside whatever is going on in your life. I thought that was a nice way to put it, because one of my feelings about the way people talk about Abstract Expressionism is that it has to be autobiographical. I say to myself why do I have to put those things into my painting? There is something about life that is timeless, and what's timeless is nature. So I would rather my work be thought of as a new type of landscape, which recognizes the magnitude of nature. I love the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. In his last books he was bitterly anti-war and very much down on civilization and, yes, those are downer feelings and many people didn't like them. In his last book (*DOUBLE AXE and Other Poems*, 1977) his publisher, Horace Liveright, wrote a whole section denouncing an association with Jeffers' ideas. There is a part of me like Jeffers and Samuel Beckett that does feel the tragedy and sadness reflected in mankind and civilization. The awesomeness and timelessness of nature that we can connect with provide a haven for better thoughts.

Yau: Well, your paintings are really about slowing time down. They ask for the kind of looking that can't take place in a museum anymore. The museum is geared towards looking at it, recognizing it, and moving to the next one, because there are people behind you with little earphones on who want to keep up with the

audio tour. I'm not making a generalization when I say that there is a kind of art that fits into this situation of speed. And here you're making a painting that says, "Slow down, sit in front of this painting, or hold it in your hand, look at it slowly and become intimate with it." And that aesthetic isn't really recognized in a large public sense by museums.

Seliger: It's so interesting to me that you brought up that word time, because Tobey used to say that music is duration of time, and how do you express this in a painting? He put marks at certain intervals so your eye would travel in time in relation to those marks. And I often hear people say, "Why do you put all that in? Nobody is going to see it," and I tell them that I'm going to see it!

Bui: I've never thought of you as painting for an audience, but there's faith.

Seliger: Yes, there is always that. And it happens, there's no question. I went to Siena's show by myself after the opening and was looking at it and watching people. One was on a cell phone and glanced at the paintings and then went out. Some looked at it longer, and one Japanese girl came with a big portfolio and sat and started to draw one—it was wonderful to watch. Many people miss something when they look at them and say, "I got it, those are mathematical symmetries." They don't necessarily see that this corner is different from that corner, and that little square is different from another, and the endless variation requires serious viewing.

Bui: There's a whole movement that's based on the compulsive attention to repetitive mark-making, largely championed by the artist/gallerist Joe Amrhein of Pierogi Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where Siena had his first show in 1996. There're also artists like Daniel Zeller, Steven Charles and few others whose works do not appeal to the natural world; they instead seem to yield to the information world.

Seliger: Pollock said his drip painting were the new technique that could express the age of the atomic bomb. Every age needs a new visual expression. But at the same time I'm not so conscious of my work in terms of it having some kind of synthesis as far as my interest in scientific theories, biology, and philosophy are concerned, never mind any link to electronic reality as you've pointed out. I would like to know more about these younger artists because it's a very comforting feeling to know that something like this is happening. I guess it means that if you live long enough, and wait long enough somebody sees what you're up to. I have to say that the joy that I have painting is like nothing else. I do it every day, every day is a discovery. I destroy a lot too. I have a show now with 16 paintings, I probably did 30, but I wiped out most of the ones that didn't go far enough.

Yau: I think the word that you use—"Joy"—is really central to your work, and that comes across. For all the labor put into your work you never announce all the labor. It's very different from Frank Auerbach who puts a lot of labor into it and you feel like he's letting you know that he put a lot of labor into it.

Seliger: I saw an Auerbach show in London, and I got such a kick out of all that thick paint!

Bui: John touched on something that is very important: What separates you from the Abstract Expressionists is that their work comes from a kind of existential angst, some kind of inner anxiety that came out of both the Great Depression and the Second World War and which was transformed into the masculine and physical gesture. It's the opposite with your work, this is where you share something with Tobey's intimate space and intricate construction. In your recent paintings, I feel there's a great variation of the theme. Some of them evoke a deep feeling toward nature—small particles dissolving in sunlight or water—while others, like the color penciled paintings, have a kind of urban energy. Could you talk more about that?

Seliger: I've always thought of my paintings as an equivalence of the inner world of nature, which is expressed through analogy rather than description. I try to reveal the unseen in nature with my deep respect for the structural order of the natural forms, which is to me the mystery of life. Each painting has its own life that was created from the void, and to me the void is where I try to enter through the organic process of painting. Believe me, no matter how I plan a painting beforehand, I always fail. So what I do is to follow

where the painting takes me, like a meditation—you and the void will end up as one. And all of those resources are available to us in nature.

Yau: I think that's very crucial in an understanding of your work, because, as much as it comes out of nature, we can't trace it back to a specific source.

Seliger: I see it very much as a new form of landscape painting. People who painted landscapes were bound to nature. Along with reading about physics, I read the writings of Thoreau and John Burroughs and Loren Eiseley. When I gave Tobey *The Immense Journey* to read, he thought it was fantastic. Those people who rhapsodize about nature, describe it so well, when John Burroughs gets in a little handmade row boat and floats down a river and camps out in the grass—those are very remarkable things. And W.H. Hudson—I've got a book that he's written. *A Traveler in Little Things*—I think that's a wonderful title, and I've got his letters. And this feeds and supports what I do.

Yau: Is your work rhapsodic?

Seliger: I often have thought that maybe it's religious in a way. It's about something bigger than we are. I've read a lot of philosophy, I love Wittgenstein, and of course I puzzle over some of what he says. It's a lot like how people play chess to keep their minds alert to many possibilities. Philosophy does that for me.

Bui: One thing about Tobey is that he has a uniform idea that all religions can be contained within one religion.

Seliger: Tobey was very private about his Bahai religious beliefs. Once, Lyonel Feininger, Mark Tobey and I were walking in the woods in Stockbridge, MA, discussing each other's work. Feininger felt that Tobey had a sense of infinite space—Tobey commented that Feininger was like a Bach organ fugue in his architectural space. They both agreed that I was “the eye” as I was looking intensely at the ground at the very smallest, most revealing aspects of nature. It is evident to me that Tobey's focus was celestial, Feininger's is architectural, and mine is terrestrial.

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