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 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

HEATHER HUTCHISON with Barbara Rose

March 2020

“I do a lot of building and inventing,
but I do it in the language of painting”

Heather Hutchison was born in 1964 in Corvallis, Oregon. Her father was an itinerant caricaturist and the family traveled through California, Oregon, and Arizona, finally settling in Bisbee Arizona, six miles north of the Mexican border. She had a studio first in Manhattan, then in DUMBO, Brooklyn. Since 2001, she has worked in Saugerties, New York where she lives with her husband artist Mark Thomas Kanter and son Dante.



Heather Hutchison, *Down Under*, 2020. 72 x 43 x 4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

In 1989, Hutchison had her first solo exhibition at Bess Cutler Gallery in SoHo, followed by solo exhibitions at Jamison Thomas Gallery in SoHo, Nohra Haime Gallery, Margaret Thatcher Projects in Chelsea, and Winston Wächter in Chelsea, NYC where her current work is on display. Her work is in the Brooklyn Museum, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and the

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Smithsonian Museum of American History. She has been included in exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, the Montclair Art Museum, the Smithsonian, and the Knoxville Museum of Art, as well as in the 44th Biennial Exhibition of American Painting at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. We met in the summer of 1996 when she joined a group of artists where I was teaching in Perugia, Italy and I have followed the steady evolution of her work since.

Barbara Rose (Rail): I have followed the evolution of your work since we met in Umbria in the mid '90s. At that time you were beginning to refine the horizontal band image that is the hallmark of your paintings although you constantly refine how you create color and light and a unique sense of space. I have always felt that the unique optical effects of the Umbrian sky created by the fog that blankets the mountains in the morning was critical to your work—just as it was to that of Raphael, who was born in Umbria. Is that true?

Heather Hutchison: I love those Umbrian landscapes in the background of Raphael's paintings, especially early on when he was still under the influence of Perugino. He depicts the sky, the rolling hills and the Apennine Mountains with a particular range of atmospheric blues that make them feel so very far in the distance, as if it would take the sitter in the portrait weeks to get there. Honestly I haven't thought about those paintings in a long time, I don't see many in New York, but I was very moved by them in situ. I guess you're right. You could say that many aspects of the Umbrian landscape do show up in my work- the way the warm sun makes the walls of the sand colored buildings glow in contrast to the cool blocks



Heather Hutchison, *Stratocumulous*, 2019. 38 x 49 x 4 inches.
Courtesy the artist.

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of shadow, I often think about getting to those temperatures. Morandi was farther north, but he did nail the feeling.

The heliotropic fields of sunflowers with their golden faces always radiating the sun- fields and fields of them interspersed with bands of corn fields, all in rows, rolling and floating above the blue-gray Tiber River. The fog does roll and settle in, making the hilltop villages and everything else above the fog float, it's very dreamlike.

Rail: In your paintings, the edge to edge band from top to bottom inevitably evokes the horizon line. You traveled the Southwest where in some places all you can see is “the big sky” with nothing interrupting the horizon. Did that vision influence your painting?

Hutchison: I think the expansive skies of my childhood were certainly an influence on my work. As a child I lived in Arizona but also on the coast in California, as well as in Oregon. Looking at both the desert and the sea enabled me to see long distances. It felt safe to know what was coming or what was going on in the next town, or to see that the same thunderstorm that had just fallen on me had travelled and was now falling on my friends just over the border in Mexico, in a completely different country! I also remember the moment looking out over the desert when I understood clearly how Native Americans could communicate over long distances with smoke signals.

Rail: Why did you decide to base your composition in the edge to edge horizontal band?

Hutchison: I found the horizontal line slicing all the way across the picture plane



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the most succinct way for me to divide space into a dynamic composition. I've made a few vertically oriented pieces—in those pieces I thought only of my body standing and fully occupying the space I was creating. I felt my body could walk through those pieces. I think of myself as a vertical being in a horizontal world.

Rail: So the sky is always your inspiration?

Hutchison: More broadly, natural phenomena and their resulting light are my inspirations. Most natural phenomena that I experience daily is happening in the sky. It's a good show and I spend a lot of time observing it. It is my constant inspiration. For example, floating just above the earth, there has been an inordinate amount of low-lying fog recently. This type of atmosphere is in some of the new paintings. Recently, through images in the news, I've been inspired to work with the light that rises to the sky from wildfires, most of which result from human causes. Human intervention in nature is bringing about new types of phenomena through disaster. Is this natural? Is it our new nature? The light filtering through all the dust and smoke being created from this upheaval is captivating to me; it is sublime and beautiful while simultaneously invoking nausea and distress.

Rail: Is the fact that the sky can be both evocative and abstract important to you?

Hutchison: For me abstraction is a better means to get to the emotions and feelings that are evoked through natural phenomena than painting nature. I want to create a fundamental universal image. Both metaphorically and literally, the sky is “overarching” and links us all together. It is the most visible experience all humans share. The sky is constantly changing and we are all witness to and actively aware of these constant changes no matter who we are or where we are. The truism that the only

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constant is change has been a strong concept in my work since responding to images of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Rail: What were your early constructions like?

Hutchison: My first abstract paintings were constructed from materials I fished from out of the bins of my next door neighbors on 24th street between 10th and 11th Avenues: Wood plexiglass, craft wood, and left overs from Metropolitan Lumber & Hardware, and Plexi from Plexicraft. I was incising straight lines in the Plexiglass, suspending it with nails over plywood, sometimes building shelves that were painted, often with stripes as the imagery. I let the waves of the wood grain come through the paint. When daylight moved across the routed lines it cast a shadow, like a sundial. I also found ceramic tiles and built gridded abstract pieces, although they looked like swimming pools. Maybe I was thinking of David Hockney's swimming pools. At the time I was working as a studio assistant to Joseph Amar, who used beeswax in his lead paintings. The beeswax was so seductive when painted on the Plexi. The result was a diffused and atmospheric light which took the edge off, like Vaseline on a camera lens. When I painted the wax on the tiles, it felt like water. These early pieces were very sculptural, yet they hung on the wall.



Heather Hutchison, *Twilighting*, 2020. 24 x 25 x 4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: How did you make your first paintings?

Hutchison: My first paintings were done when my family moved into the Copper Queen Hotel, a grand hotel in Bisbee, Arizona. We owned it, so I could do whatever I wanted. I was six

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or seven when I checked myself into a room on the third floor with north light and called it my studio. I would set up still lifes. My dad, who was a caricaturist and a vicious critic, would come in and “teach” me. And there were great artists in this tiny, funky, former boomtown I was fortunate to know as a child. Peter Young arrived around the same time as we did in 1969. He had left NYC and Castelli, although I think he kept working with Dick Bellamy in NYC. Peter owned the other hotel in town, The Philadelphia. He still does. Alex Hay continues to work in that building too. I still go back to Bisbee regularly. When we moved away when I was 12, it broke my heart. From the town I learned early on that it was okay to follow your vision and that being an artist was a good thing.

Rail: I always considered Peter a great artist and wondered what happened to him. Who were the leading artists in New York when you got there?

Hutchison: Moving to New York opened up a whole new world for me. I came to go to The Art Students League of New York. I was following the light in the paintings of Edward Hopper and Guy Pène du Bois. The Eastern light in their paintings was very different from the light in the West. I learned that they had been affiliated with the Art Students League where, I learned, one could register for classes a month at a time. That meant I could afford the fees while supporting myself as a waitress. At that time in my life, a semester felt like an unfathomable amount of time. I just couldn't do it. I think I only took two life drawing classes at the League. But visiting museums and galleries in New York opened me up firsthand to a wide array of artworks, both contemporary and historical. It was this full immersion into the creative process of others that allowed me to make connections between old and new ideas and ultimately to find the place where I could become part of the ongoing dialogue.

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Rail: When you arrived in New York in 1986 what impressed you the most?

Hutchison: I think my work first coalesced after I experienced the retrospectives of Donald Judd at the Whitney in 1988 and Christopher Wilmarth at MoMA in 1989. Being immersed in the creative process of an artist through a retrospective is essential to understanding the work. You can't really understand a single work of art without knowing what came before it and what came after it. You have to study the process.



Heather Hutchison, *Freeze, Freeze, Thou Bitter Sky*, 2019. 30 x 29 x 4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: I know you work constantly and slowly until you achieve the effect you want. This is quite the opposite of the fast food approach to art of today. I remember Lee Krasner saying “avant, avant...where are they all running?” Why do you work slowly?

Hutchison: I don't think it's a choice, but I do appreciate the luxury of being able to spend the time doing this. In each painting I've set up a problem, in that I'm working on at least five different surfaces; the front, the back, all four sides of the box, and all the space in between the front and the back of the box. The color and the composition result from all those facets coming together, so of course there are many combinations of things to try out. I'm always finding new ways to do things and developing new and unorthodox material uses and making my own mediums and brushes and supports. Plus I'm a one woman operation, so it takes time. I don't really keep track of the method I used to get to a result, so each time it's as if I'm dealing with a beginner's mind. I could probably bring in an efficiency expert and save some time, but I think I'm addicted to the process, the highs and the lows and the learning each time. I'll try something,

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and it fails and falls apart, or occasionally a painting will just sing right off the bat and seem perfect, then I come back in a different light and all that was so wonderful has disappeared. In the space of time used up by making the thing with my own hands I learn about how all the different facets come together to make a complete perception, it's all important and profound information to me, then I pretty much forget it and start again. I also need to keep it around for a few months to scrutinize it and make sure that I trust it to be out there on its own. That's probably something my shrink could help me with.

Rail: When and why did you become a painter?

Hutchison: I started referring to myself as a painter with some conviction in 1986, when I moved to NYC from the Bay Area. When I arrived, I was 22. I noticed what people my age were doing: they were referring to themselves with titles like poet, musician, painter, actor, and living their lives with full intent as such. Eventually most became what they said they were. I have always been a painter, but I think my works are really “constructions.” I do a lot of building and inventing, but I do it in the language of painting.

Rail: When we met in Umbria in the mid '90s, I was immediately attracted by your paintings of luminous horizontal bands. I was teaching in the American University M.F.A. program Don Kimes set up in Perugia. We fled American University and Washington, D.C. and went home to the Renaissance together. Now Don has set up the



Heather Hutchison, *Incoming*, 2019. 30 x 28 x 4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

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program again in Corciano, the town outside Perugia where we lived and worked. What were you doing there?

Hutchison: It was a wonderful moment in Umbria in a close artists' community. The horizontal "zones" in my work at that time were created through the combination of separate boxes and panels. The negative space between the panels which boxes created a mysterious spatial illusion.

Rail: Who influenced you at the time?

Hutchison: My husband, Mark Thomas Kanter, a painter who studied with Nicolas Carone at New York Studio School. He attended the first year of Carone's International School of Art when it was in the Franciscan Monastery in Todi. I became close to Nick and the community there. When Mark spent time and worked in Umbria, Nick's school was in its permanent home in Monte Castello di Vibio. Phong Bui, publisher and editor of *The Rail*, was one of the teachers. We kept coming back to Umbria, with Mark helping to run the American University Summer Program and me being a visiting artist there. I was in the show Rosella Vasta organized at the Palazzo della Penna in Perugia *New York, Next Generation*, which included very early works by Cecily Brown. Rosella arranged for studios in the decommissioned "manicomio," a 19th century psychiatric hospital where I was pursued and attacked by one of the former patients. Living and working conditions were not easy. I was already painting my banded works, now inspired by the mineral rich earth tones, the undulating hills of varying greens, and the misty skies. Also, it was hard not to be inspired by the constant awareness of ancient civilization while in



Heather Hutchison, *Amber Waves*, 2020. 25 x 25 x 4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

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Umbria.

Rail: The latest paintings are still based on horizontal bands, but now the image is encased in a box so the space seems even more mysterious. How do you choose your colors ? And what do you put inside the box to cause the space to shimmer and seem to change with the light?

Hutchison: Actually, the paintings have been constructed inside a box since 1988. My first show at Bess Cutler was birch boxes with Plexi as the surface. Recently I moved beyond the box and have spent 10 years finding ways to get the most reflected and shifting light without using light fixtures. This began in 2007 with an installation where I used translucent materials and paint to isolate and activate the light coming through the large north-facing window and surrounding walls in Woodstock's Byrdcliffe Guild. This was also the beginning of the photography practice that I continue today, shooting long duration time-lapses of the work and tracking the shifting light. I continued to create installations within existing outdoor architecture and windows, and to research materials that reflected color and diffused light differently. I started bending light and the shadow in 2009 when I found a plexiglass bender at a garage sale. This resulted in the bent Plexi pieces that I still make which cantilever out from and float on the wall.

In the most recent pieces I've returned to the box and now am utilizing all of its facets. There is a painting on the back, on the sides, on the front, and on all the planes in between. That more mysterious light you noticed is a combination of adding reflective materials at different angles which bend light.

What's really new in the latest works is that I no longer use beeswax on the surface to create a veneer as in the past. Just this year I developed a method using an acrylic based medium that is

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extremely liberating. It's less opaque than the beeswax, so it lets more light in, so that more reflected color resonates from the box. These days I choose colors that in combination will evoke ideas of the supernatural and unearthly that occur often, even daily, in natural phenomenon and are recognizable, but are far from mundane.

Contributor

Barbara Rose

BARBARA ROSE is an art historian and curator who lives in New York and Madrid, Spain.

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