

PETER BLUM

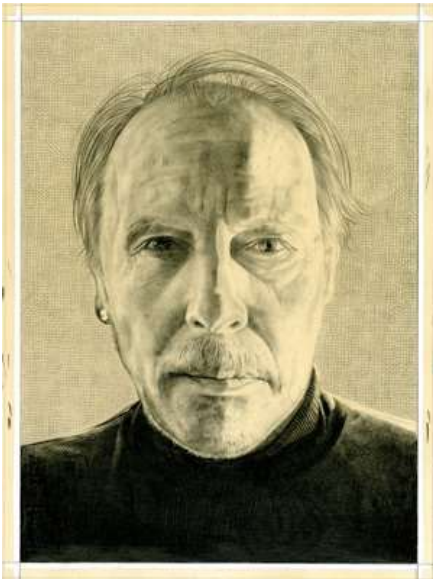
BROOKLYN RAIL

HELMUT FEDERLE

In Conversation with John Yau and Chris Martin

by Chris Martin and John Yau

Just a day before the opening of his new exhibit, *Scratching Away at the Surface* (Peter Blum, 99 Wooster Street, October 29th, 2009–January 2, 2010) Helmut Federle welcomes Art Editor John Yau and painter Chris Martin at the gallery to talk about his life and work.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Chris Martin: John and I are wondering whether this is a group of five paintings or if they are part of a larger group of paintings?

Helmut Federle: It's a large group consisting of nine paintings. But all nine were done this spring. In 2005, more or less, I stopped working.

Martin: I'd heard that you stopped painting.

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Federle: Last year I did four or five little paintings around February and suddenly I had the need to do something because the emptiness was getting too heavy and too big and so in 2008 I started making four or five little paintings. Then I stopped again until this February I felt a desire to encounter the work. I was always getting pregnant with this concept of the light going through. I mean there is the previous painting from 1985, "Innerlight."

Yau and Martin: We want to talk about "Innerlight" and these recent paintings.

Federle: I was always thinking maybe I should go on with this theme again and started working in February, but only for five weeks. In five weeks I did nine paintings.

Yau: Is this a normal way for you to work?

Federle: It wasn't normal before, but I would say during the last seven or eight years it became like this because my psychic condition was that I could not work anymore and that I wanted to stop. But I could not, I was not able to stop absolutely because even if you stop you will always be an artist somehow; you will remain an artist even if you don't work because I work 24 hours with my head and with my heart. I knew that someday I would feel that I would like to do something again. So from around 2003 on, the process of working was changing because before I was never the guy who worked from 9 to 5 like other artists, never. I always worked only when I wanted to work, but it was not as dominant as it is now. Now I am really in a period where it becomes very difficult for me to work.

Yau: Do you draw when you're not painting?

Federle: No. I read.

Yau: You look at stuff.

Federle: Exactly. I read and I walk around.

Martin: You spoke earlier about helping Peter Blum with his house. But you have other creative projects. You said you had redone a house in Italy. And yesterday John told me you had done that with a house that you once had in New Mexico. Does your creativity go into that?

Federle: That is also a result of my training in the 60s. The school in Basel I went to was in the applied arts; it wasn't a fine arts academy. I was not trained to become an artist; I studied disciplines like sculpture, painting, photography, architecture, and typography. I was trained in these things and I have always been interested in them.

Yau: Yes, you have made photographs too, right?

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Federle: Right, but very recently, only a few. My main goal was always to be a painter, but then lately, I did some major architecture projects, and for me it's interesting to work as an architect or with an architect. It's different than working as a painter.

Yau: Right, because you have to work with other people.

Federle: Exactly. And the content of the work depends on something external and the content in my paintings depends only on my vision, my view of the things. It is the dematerialization of a vision. It is a trace and not a proof.

Yau: It's interesting that you mentioned "Innerlight" because yesterday Chris was talking about the first time he saw that painting.

Martin: It was by itself in a large room at Mary Boone, and I was very moved because the front room of that show consisted of some of your black and white initial paintings, and to have both was very moving. I remember being very shocked, and thinking it was just a fantastic painting right away. It's amazing to me to hear that it has taken you 20 years to come back and, I mean, I also find that very moving.

Federle: I think it was always part of my problem, you know, that I was never an inventor in this sense, and I was never capable of making a brand. I was never able to brand a painting.

Martin: Congratulations.

Federle: Often my work was misunderstood in a formal sense. I'm absolutely no formalist. I am a deep spiritual searcher in the romantic tradition. Even the geometric work, you will be more correct to read it in a more romantic or spiritual way.

Martin: I remember seeing your work for the first time at John Gibson Gallery in '84. The paintings were large, yellow-green and grey, geometric. That was at a time when big geometric paintings were in fashion in New York City, and I was very struck by how your paintings were not cynical or fashionable. As John noted, they were not nostalgic either.

Federle: No, no, they're not nostalgic. No, I see it more in an Asian way, that I, as an artist, don't have to invent something, I just go down the same path as everybody else, and make distinctions in my period, my time. References are warm and beautiful energies. I am part of a history and not a statement of the moment. In the end I'm not doing something different than what Giacometti or Kandinsky did. In my opinion, an artist is always doing the same thing. The values are spiritual, philosophical, it's always the question "Why are we here?" "Where are we going?" "What is it?" "What is an existence?" Of course this kind of thinking is not very modern, it was already around when I was a student in 1969. I was deeply interested in art as an existential value. I'd

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come out of the generation that was reading Camus and Kierkegaard. It was a time when we went to India. This had a big influence on my thinking. And for me, art is only the visualizing of inner movements.

Yau: Yet, in your work, as much as it has craft, it's never emphasized. It's certainly not casual either; it's a very narrow path that you walk. The looseness in these recent paintings comes from practice and discipline, like a Zen archer. So it's interesting for me to hear that you didn't paint for a while and then you suddenly had this compulsion. It's like the vision comes out of your head and onto the canvas in some way.

Federle: I come from the countryside in Switzerland, on the Austrian border, actually from a very poor family. In our family there was no culture or concept of living. I must have had this trembling energy already when I was young. I wanted to go into the art world, no? When I went to the school in Basel in the 60s, I was very, very much impressed by the American paintings in the Basel museum. I always say that my biggest influence is the collection of American paintings in the Basel museum and my experience in Asia and the Middle East. I learned from these artists, like Barnett Newman or Clifford Still. I learned that the value is spiritual, and not formal. This gave me the chance to enter the world with meaning, with sense. Then, of course, at the end of the 60s when Pop Art came up, I felt very uncomfortable. Suddenly I realized that this is not what I was searching for. This became worse and worse, and about 10 or 15 years ago, after living for a time in New Mexico, I decided I didn't want to live in the world of culture any more. I wanted to cultivate my life. It was just something else. So you have to know that, for example, I was only once at the Documenta [in Kassel, Germany], and this was when I was a student in the 60s. During the last 10 or 15 years, I never go to see shows, movies, or theater because I was so fed up with this concept of spectacular attitude, to make a product that is consumed. I never wanted this.

Martin: So, Helmut, this sounds like you've been through a very difficult time the last few years. It sounds like, and I sense this in some of these new paintings, a tremendous melancholy, and I see that the first painting is titled "Resurrection." Are you feeling, now, some sense of resurrection? I mean we're all hoping that you continue to make paintings. We all love your paintings.

Federle: Not really. [Laughs.] But, I mean, it became obvious that since the 80s, I have become more and more interested in religion. This had to do with my trips to Asia, to Cambodia, to Laos. I was always interested in Buddhism, but I'm not practicing really, so don't misunderstand me. I was interested in spirituality, but I always felt that as soon as the spirituality becomes religion, it becomes group dynamic. Then I was not interested. So that's why I wanted to enter the art world. Because the art world was the world of religion without the church, without the institutions telling you what to do. In the art world they were also searching for meanings like in religion. And, I mean, the great artists, Giacometti, Brancusi, they were all finding solutions, parallel to religion.

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Martin: At the same time, when I saw your paintings for the first time in New York, and there was this great interest in abstract painting, I wouldn't describe the SoHo art scene as a very spiritual place.

Federle: Of course not.

Martin: It was all about French semiotic theory and this very cynical appropriation of form. That is why your work stood out and seemed to be unique and serious and not tied to fashion. At the same time it seemed very brand new.

Federle: But don't forget, they always like you when you are part of the group but they never like you when you are leaving the group. I think it's more interesting when you see how this young boy without cultural knowledge enters the world of culture. At school in Basel in the 60s, I was strongly involved with French culture. As a 15 year old boy, the first big city I ran away to was Paris. French culture means Matisse, Cézanne, all the greats, and at that time some younger French artists—that was my encounter with the French art world. Then I was always highly fascinated by American culture, especially American movies—don't forget that James Dean, Westerns, and John Ford had a very big impact on me as a youngster. I always felt that in a certain way I belonged to this cowboy culture—the loneliness, the emptiness, the empty spaces—which is an alternative to a personality who is capable of socializing. I'm a country boy, so I always had this American sentiment, if you want, or American dreams.

Martin: But the American wilderness, the American west, is unlike any wilderness in Europe.

Federle: Absolutely. And when I saw the American paintings in Basel, I made the connection between the painters and the land. I could see that a painter like Barnett Newman, you only do this if you have land like here. On the other hand, in Giacometti's sense, you can only do this work if you live in the kind of Swiss mountain, where he comes from.

Yau: The poet Charles Olson said: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom Cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy."

Federle: Absolutely. That defines also your concept of freedom and liberty, *Freiheit*. Which is different than the European. The European concept of liberty and freedom is more intellectual, and here it is a physical.

Martin: I wanted to ask you about a great drawing show here at this gallery, in a retrospective eight, nine, ten years ago. There were a number of early drawings that were clearly Swiss Alp inspired. Does the landscape where you are living or traveling enter your work in any direct way?

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Federle: Not in a direct way. Maybe it's about the metaphysics of nature. There is certainly a reference to the metaphysics of Being. Again, they are just metaphors for my desires. It's obvious that I'm not a Mediterranean artist.

Yau: It's true. [Laughs.]

Martin: One thing John and I were talking about yesterday is your color. You have a very specific and very profound sense of color, but it's very much a northern color sense. There's not a lot of pinks or Matisse turquoise. Can you talk about this green, this yellow-green that I've seen in your paintings for many years and that we see here now?

Federle: In the period in Basel, from when I left art school until '79, my paintings were all, more or less, grey, white, and black. I think that I didn't want to enter into the world of color. The color scheme grey, white, black is not anti-color but just a different way of feeling color, a psychic way that served my inner tremblings, my inner energy. When I moved to New York in '79, yellow entered into the color combination with black or with grey, and if you look at the first painting that I did here in New York, the yellowish is more yellow than it is later on. It became more and more greenish. I think I'm not in control of those things. When I work, I ask myself what I want to see, what I want to express. I cannot exactly say why I used this yellow, it's up to other people to judge. But this color, strange enough, exists in nature. Don't forget that this kind of green exists on the rocks, on the mountains you have often this kind of greenish moss. The prairie, it's neither yellow neither green. But most of the decision has a root in nature. Don't forget that my love is related to nature. I like rocks. I like trees, walking in that world. So of course it must come from those, even though I don't want to illustrate those things, because an artist should not be an illustrator of something that he experiences. My paintings are not about nature; they are a parallel to nature. Also my Asian attitude, you can say, he is really influenced by Asian philosophies and practices. Not in an obvious way, but in a secondary way.

Martin: We were talking yesterday about your interest in pottery and your interest in tapestry. I remember the show here where you showed one painting, "Panthera Nigera," and as in many of your paintings, there is the sense of weaving together of brush strokes, and John has that book about the crayon drawings that really look like a woven grid. I was wondering if that is something that you are aware of...that sense of weaving.

Yau: Yes, and in these paintings it feels like it comes together from putting one thing next to, on top of, and against another, until a form and/or light emerges; that you find your way to that.

Federle: Like I said previously, I don't want to be an artist with a recognizable way of doing. Those are paintings that are absolutely closed without any entry or way in. But to come back to your question, on the big painting "Panthera Negra." Was I making this kind of net? It was not the concept of the net, it was just using very thin color, and always

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finding it, the texture, you know, because I don't want to make a form, and then fill it out, so I'm searching for the forms. But with the crayon drawing, it's absolutely different. The crayon drawing is made without emotions. They are like a diary—every day you just make a crayon drawing, and then you look at what came out. The painting is controlled by my intentions, by my inner *Sehnsucht* (“Yearning”), my process of working with a heart and a spirit. When I did these drawings, which lasted only about three years, I stopped, because I didn't want to follow them, I just wanted to experience a different mentality. Now, to speak of these new paintings, when I started this one, I think, this one is one of the earliest. It's maybe the second one. When I started this, I didn't really use color, I used water with a little color in it, and during the process of working I even washed down, washed off some of the color.

Martin: Yes, this looks wiped off.

Federle: Many of them are just washed off again.

Martin: But you're starting with a light canvas and it grows darker—you start off with yellow and go into brown, and so they grow, they look as if they grow darker, as if you are tunneling away from the body. There is a kind of jeweled cave, mystical.

Federle: The light in paintings is God-related. The questions in these paintings are: Is the light coming forward or is it a passage we are going through toward the light? Maybe it is both. Are we present in front of the painting or are we present in the painting? As Louis Kahn, the architect, said, “God is in the material.”

These paintings are the result of a process of very intense concentration because I have this pot with colored water and I apply it without controlling it, actually more in a sense of Pollock's way. You just brush the paint on, or maybe you become calligraphic. And then you look and it's not good and you wash it off. Certain things remain; it's a very old fashioned way of working.

Martin: Do you work on many paintings at once?

Federle: No, I finish each painting. I cannot work on a second one at the same time. But as I said, nine paintings in four weeks, that means that I worked like being an addict looking for drugs.

Yau: This is a good addiction.

Federle: But then it was finished.

Yau: It's interesting because it seems like you want to address both sides of making art. On one side is the belief that the artist is omnipotent, all controlling, like God, and you know that this is not true in life, but that there is this fiction that the artist can be in

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complete control. In your case, you make something, but you are not omnipotent. When you were making those crayon drawings, you were acknowledging that you're not in control. Then, in these paintings, you're not in control, you're working to find something. That seems to be one of the things that goes through a lot of your work. In these paintings you find the final forms and they might be defined by what's not painted.

Federle: You know it depends on your *Sehnsucht* capacity. *Sehnsucht* is not desire but it is close to desire. I would love to be in Kyoto or I would love to see my girlfriend. It's not here, but you lunge for it. So *Sehnsucht* is different in a painting than it is in a drawing. A drawing is not depending on the *Sehnsucht* capacity, because you materialize inner energies in a graphical way. But in the painting, it's not formalizing a graphical result, because the *Sehnsucht* capacity is much bigger in the painting—that is the difference between the artist and the designer. If you look at the stone gardens in Kyoto, you can immediately see that this is the result of *Sehnsucht*. They wanted to create harmony, beauty, dignity, all of those big values about living and being. *Ikebana* is the same thing. It's yearning.

Yau: In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire emphasizes the solitariness of the artist in the city; making art is not a group activity. He's really the first to define alienation.

Federle: And it's never satisfying.

Martin: Let me first say that in New York City right now, I feel that there is a lot of energy and interest in painting, specifically abstract painting, and for me personally, I think of myself as a young painter, your work has been very important to a number of artists in New York and it continues to be so, you may not be aware of this but there is a lot of energy around abstract painting in New York City right now. This show would be very inspiring to younger painters. What would you say to a younger painter in New York? What's your advice to younger painters in New York? Is it possible? Are we fucked? [Laughs.]

Federle: It's maybe satisfying in a sense. We are speaking now, now I'm satisfied, but how often do I experience such a situation? Every five years? And what do you do with all the rest of your time, when you are left alone? So, I would say: if you're obsessed, of course, there is no other question, then you do it, but you have to understand that you will be alone. As soon as the artist becomes socially capable he loses a lot. Because it's the optimism of group dynamics that kills the values.

Martin: It seems like there was a moment at the beginning of European abstraction where there was this optimism and this belief that they could access these higher realities that they had found. It also seems to me that there have been moments in this short history when some of the abstract painters really felt—I'm trying to defend some optimism—that there was a cause for optimism.

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Federle: But today, when you have all these huge collectors who are hair cutters, lawyers, investment counselors, ship owners, or whatever, what do you want to teach the society? Society believes it is capable of understanding the creator's desire, the creator's energies, and many artists agree to that. That's the problem. That's why I said in my speech in Paris this spring that there was never such a conventionalized period in the world where art and society are equal, on the same level.

Martin: Well, the whole insane Western society and culture is destroying the planet and we have an ecological crisis and a political crisis, I agree with you. But I also believe that when you walk into this space here and you see five paintings, that the good stuff is still here. It's living. It's still living.

Federle: Thank you. I could do this show in Switzerland. I could do this show in Austria. No one would look at it. No one would even think about looking at it, you know. This only means that here in New York you still have people who are searching for values. It only means that. But it doesn't mean that my position is stable. Not at all. They will laugh at it. Three weeks ago, in Zurich, I gave this speech and one of the professors said, "You are sounding very depressed and very conservative. You sound very disillusioned." And I said, "Maybe you think that this is an offense for me, but this is not an offense." I declare myself as somebody who is in a certain way depressive and conservative. You were thinking that this is an offense to me. But do you want to be a rebel when everyone is a rebel?

Yau: When Edouard Manet gets accepted finally by the Academy and his friend Antonin Proust brings him the official letter, Manet is reported to have said; "the critics kept saying that I was inconsistent, they didn't know that this was music to my ears."

Federle: That's beautiful. That shows again that I am just one in the line of many.

Yau: In the art world or poetry world you make your own family, and you make your own lineage, and you get to decide what your family and what your lineage is. In life, you're given a family and you had no choice and then finally in the poetry and the art world you get to create your company as Robert Creeley would say.

Federle: Exactly. You know how often critics think that I idolized Rothko or Agnes Martin, which I don't do. I just think that I have maybe the same condition, to react to the world as they had. It's not the same result, it's just the same condition. It's the same with Camus and Sartre—I read Camus. There you have the slight distinction between the one who represents more the metaphysical world in an empty space, you know Camus was born in Algeria, and Sartre, who is the typical city intellectual, you know, everything rationalized through the head. Why did Giacometti have to leave his little place in the Swiss mountains to go to Paris? Why did I have to leave my little place on the Austrian border to go to New York? It's just the same condition, unhappiness, and *Sehnsucht*.

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Martin: Yearning.

Federle: Yearning, exactly. So you go. And this defines you. But maybe, Chris, you are right. I don't know all these artists, but if we talk now about all these artists whose work is sent all over the world in big collections, what is it?

Martin: Well, I see you as one of these Northern Romantic yearning profound souls who has been helpless but to follow this path and I think this path is never the popular path. This is never the successful academic painter of society, but always the type of artist that we've been talking about, who does his work regardless of whether or not he is in the spotlight or not. At the same time, I think that this work, this real work is happening.

Federle: But Chris it's not about the spotlight. You misunderstand me. I think the artist has to work against the common sense. When the common sense is not there anymore, when he doesn't work against something, that's what we have to do today. Klee and Kandinsky worked against the common sense outside of themselves, like I said, they were the masters; they wanted to form the world differently. Today, society is on a very high level in the sense of knowing everything, but not in the sense of feeling what is true in things. This is different. Knowing me is easy, but knowing what's in the paintings is difficult.

Martin: Ha! Lovely. [*Claps.*]

Yau: I don't disagree with that. It's interesting that you bring the whole notion of light to a world that is more and more materialistic. They don't want to acknowledge that there can be such a thing. It's not just the Marxist theory of material, it's also the capitalist notion of material. The material should and has triumphed over everything.

Federle: Absolutely.

Yau: And I think, in that way, you do go against common sense.

Federle: Yes. Exactly. In this way, I am very conservative, close to reactionary. I think I don't have to feed the world today. First I have to find for myself a sense of being and if I find this sense of being for myself, somebody else can maybe gain from it. There again, I come back to values like dignity, generosity, passivity, it's very important for me because we live in a world that is offensive. Every meaning is offensive.

Martin: Passivity meaning receptive?

Federle: Passivity, not wanting to explain. I don't want to prove anything. Because many people always want to show you something, to prove something. Or entertain you. They think they are generous, but, in fact, they are not. They occupy the space for your inner

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desires. Your inner desire is a desire for quietness, for dignity, for beauty, even beauty and tragedy.

Martin: Can you talk about five and the pentagon in these paintings?

Federle: I don't know—it was an accident. I knew it could not be four. One of the nine paintings that I did in February is round. But it's just accidental. You have to see that I'm not standing before the canvas, saying, "Now I'll do one with five." It just comes up and I see that its five, and then I think, "Oh I'll do another one with five," and that feels comfortable for a certain time. I think you can compare my method of working with the method of *Ikebana*. How you place a flower according to your next flower or your next branch.

Martin: Do you know the work of Arthur Dove?

Federle: No, I don't know Arthur Dove's work.

Martin: He was a good friend of Georgia O'Keeffe, a great American abstract painter—I feel, better than O'Keeffe, I feel the best of that generation. I'll send you some books. There was just a show in Massachusetts of Dove and O'Keeffe.

Federle: This early American period is never shown in Europe.

Martin: I know, many people don't know who these artists are.

Federle: And at this point they even have problems with Abstract Expressionism. I have a friend who did his thesis on Clifford Still. For years he tried to organize a show. Nobody wanted to show Clifford Still! They want to show Andy Warhol! In Vienna in the last three years we have had about five Warhol shows.

I think one of the big problems is that art is always trying to invent something. It's this idea that the artist needs to be an inventor, or do something new. This is absolutely wrong, you know? It's really the search for the metaphysical eternity.

The search for religious orientation is very interesting in this society where everything is rationalized. As youngsters we always want to leave church. It's a normal reflex, because there's no eros in religion. You cannot pray to God and fuck, it's not possible, so you want to leave the church, you become like a wild animal, and then someday you come back. Maybe you fucked enough. I don't know. Certain earlier paintings of mine were eros-driven. These paintings here are not eros-driven. I was always open to religion but never practicing it, only by my desire for the spiritual balance, and slowly in the 80s I found out that I had quite good reaction to Christianity again, because I didn't judge it anymore in a political way. It's not about being just, it's about being metaphysical.

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When I lived in New Mexico, I got to know Agnes Martin and Bruce Nauman, who is a great, great artist. Bruce invited us to dinner, and he and I talked about boots and knives, cowboy stuff. I also met Richard Tuttle. I remember talking to Agnes about Mondrian, and I said: "Do you know how Mondrian defined the vertical and the horizontal?" Agnes always pretended not to know or maybe she didn't know. I said "For Mondrian, the vertical is male, and the horizontal is female." And she said "That might be the reason I'm not doing any more verticals." You know, I once said to her: "For me, you are one of the last great landscape painters." And she looked at me, became quite adamant and said, "No, that's not true! I make non-relational abstractions." I saw this as a typical dogma, a dogma that came up in the 60s, that you have to be a non-relational artist. I question that. What does non-relational even mean? Why would you want to make a statement of the moment?

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