

Thomas Lawson interviewed by Sohrab Mohebbi, for a publication to accompany the post-MFA show, 2017

Sohrab Mohebbi- There are certain traditions or let's say conventions at CalArts that maybe are tied to its identity or mythology, can you talk about that?

Tom Lawson: There are many mythic histories that get repeated over the years, but the thing you have to realize is that they are actually tied to personalities. So they're not really conventions there. The really important thing about CalArts is that the entire curriculum derives from the work of the faculty. Every art school in the world says, "It's a faculty of working artists" or "We're on the cutting edge of" this and that and of course, we're the same, except, and this is hugely important, what is different is that we don't have a pre-determined curriculum that moves students through steps to mastery of a skill of some kind.

SM: Can you explain that a little?

TL: What we are engaged in is an ongoing investigation of what makes convincing art at any given moment. The faculty is a group of artists who agree, for one reason or another, to be at CalArts for this period of time. And what they're doing as teachers is talking about what currently is vital in terms of art-making and art-reception.

SM: And how does that work?

TL: Because life moves and shifts, and people change, and continue thinking —these are artists, working on their own stuff, going out into the world and encountering things and doing projects and coming back to the students and then trying out ideas and this creates an intellectual dynamic. It's a much more discursive program. The whole thing is an open structure, there are no fixed departments, and as a student you are not coming in to study with one person to do one thing. You're coming in to understand what kind of art you might want to make in this current art world.

SM: Do you think, regardless of personalities, that a kind of close scrutiny of the work is one of the pillars of the kind of discursive—

TL: It's absolutely one of the pillars! But it's not unique, most art schools do something like this. I think what is different is that we have so many approaches to the crit, all student-centered—one person will have the student present the work; and another will ask the student to remain silent, let the classmates present, or discuss; sometimes there's an auxiliary aspect, a reading or something, or a process of revisiting, taking a second look at what was said. But the core of it is everyone in the class is paying a great deal of attention to this one piece of work, or body of work, and what's being discussed is the work and does it hold up? And also how does it fit, where does it fit? And that's what constantly changes. In many ways we're all kind of nostalgic for Michael Asher's class and the fabulousness of the idea that someone would be willing to give an entire day – long into the evening – to do this. But that just fit within his way of working. There's no reason to think that anyone else would want to do that. But the attention given is the same. And now we're in a different world and some of the questions are different.

The crit is a central aspect of what we do at CalArts, but there is a larger framework. There are also the seminar classes where people bring in different topics to discuss. These can be political topics, or

artwork topics, or art history topics, social topics. In those classes you're getting into understanding an intellectual framework for widening your way of thinking, or broadening your vocabulary and so on. Balancing that is the crit. And then there's the independent study, which is one-to-one conversation in the studio context, and this is a very different level of intensity because it varies dramatically from faculty member to faculty member. So when our system is working, a student learns to think, is given time to make, absorbs a lot of information and moves through quite a range of faculty; you don't stick with one or two.

SM: So, you can have different perspectives

TL: Yes, if you're a painter, you know, it might be really good to talk with Charles Gaines or with Martine Simms. That's bringing in a kind of perspective that you might not be expecting. And it might open up something that you weren't aware of. It might make you think, "Oh! I should make a video," realizing that narrative structure is the thing that was missing all this time. Or perhaps you give some thought to how your personal emotions might be better harnessed to frame an issue of social import.

SM: And CalArts has been a place for working artists, so can you talk about how it affects their pedagogy?

TL: I think for the most part there's been a pretty consistent history of people applying to teach at CalArts – and being hired to teach at CalArts – and part of what they say, when they're being interviewed, is that they're interested in how teaching might intersect with their art making. We're not so interested in people who are just looking for a kind of gig to support their work. We want people who are conscious that there's a potential beneficial interplay.

SM: For you personally how does that work?

TL: Well, you know, I also do this Dean thing, the administrating thing, and a good part of that is trying to articulate – as I'm trying to do here – what is special about the school. So that's not a terrible thing. But I do get to teach, and it's an interesting series of challenges. One strand of things that I've done in this most recent ten-year period is a couple of classes that have been based on unforeseen project outcomes. There was the Experimental Impulse class, which lasted two and half years, I think—

SM: And that led to an exhibition?

TL: And it led to an exhibition at REDCAT [November 2011 – January 2012]. The class began with a freeform discussion about how to frame the question about experimental art in LA. In time we zeroed in on the 70s, and especially on the idea of artist initiatives, which included some of the early work done figuring out CalArts itself.

SM: Right.

TL: And then once we had made some progress with that, then we began to think about how we would actually frame it and exhibit it. Asking, "well what is a space like REDCAT?" "That's not really necessarily a space for the display of precious objects"—so, most of the show was made of Xeroxes and sound and video interviews, all ephemeral stuff.

SM: Documents.

TL: But not even the documents! Most of the show consisted of copies because the idea was that people would be able to pick them up and rifle through them. The gallery became a space for self-directed learning. So that was interesting. And more recently I taught a group class with Harry Gamboa and Jeannene Przyblyski, developing book projects in various unincorporated parts of South Los Angeles. This class focused on how do you go about going to a place you've never been before and finding out about it, and introducing yourself to a community, and what does it mean to be an artist in that kind of place? And what would be the most interesting and respectful kind of project to come out of that? And what was interesting for me in both of those projects was that I had no idea going in what the outcome would be. I was the teacher, but I was also learning.

SM: And what about painting?

TL: About a year ago I did a painting seminar that was a discussion class mostly for upper level, thinking about “where we at?” “What's up?” Everybody was super engaged, and every week we had a lively discussion, with one student taking responsibility for leading it. And we would talk about “what is Zombie Abstraction?” or whatever. And then this last semester that's just finished, I went to the opposite extreme, and I taught a studio painting class, I mean—

SM: So going to actual practice?

TL: Yes, I found myself teaching the color wheel and color mixing. We did a demo on building stretchers. I mean, it was really hands on! Toward the end of the class we had an exhibition in the Main Gallery and it had such a diverse range of approaches, it was inspiring. From fairly detailed rendered figures, through various kinds of abstractions to, anti-painting, various expressions of disgust at the thing.

SM: It's interesting you talk about this combination of diverse approaches to painting. Is that where we are with painting? Where did you figure out we are with painting?

TL: Well, we didn't. Because we had such a range of people there was a whole range of attitudes and arguments. I think I'm probably part of the last generation that was engaged in these generational battles. You know, we learned in school that Pop Art slayed the monster of Abstract Expressionism, and we, the “Pictures Generation,” wanted to do that to Conceptual Art. But I don't think anyone really gets into that anymore— [laughing]. There's not one kind of way of making art, or thinking about it.

SM: Throughout the years there's been this recurring question “why would you want an MFA?” “Why would you go to school?” What do you think of this question now?

TL: Right. My feeling on that is that ideally what you're going to get is a combination of things, mostly a clearer understanding of what's up. You know? How you need to think. I was recently asked to write up a very short kind of memoir type thing about one of my teachers in grad school in Edinburgh, someone who was really helpful to me. I realized that the real concrete [thing] that he did was that he introduced me to the avant-garde. Both the historical avant-garde – Dada and Russian Constructivism because that was his specialty – but also the avant-garde of the London scene in the late sixties – especially the Destruction in Art group because he was part of that. And in thinking about that I realized that for any artist hoping to make serious work still, you have to understand the

avant-garde. That's our language. I feel that going to graduate school is some form of clarification as to that. What's your relationship to that trajectory of thinking and action and how do you perceive that. And then the other part, which is more social, is that you make a network and, you know, if it's successful, that's actually going to be the basis of your career. I mean these people are going to be with you and help you and you're going to help them.

SM: Thank you so much Tom. Perhaps this MFA exhibition is an instance of that social aspect of the avant-garde!