

This interview took place in the “tree house” at the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut, on October 23, 2009

JOSEPH R WOLIN

Tell me about when you discovered the tree house.

NICK MILLER

The first evening I arrived at the Albers Foundation, I walked through the woods on the trail, and, on a map they'd given me, the tree house was pinpointed. But it was very early September, and it was almost completely dark and covered over by the canopy of leaves. It was a murky forest, and I couldn't find it. But I was determined just because it was on the map.

JRW You already knew you wanted to seek out the tree house?

NM No, not for painting, it just was a goal for my tour of the property, of the Foundation, not a question, initially, of wanting the tree house to paint in. After taking a few circuitous routes, I eventually spotted it, maybe twenty-five feet in the air. It was like a fairy tale that first evening, climbing up, I fell asleep up here, then woke to the evening forest: and a kind of epiphany; that this was the place I needed to be.

I call it a tree house but it's really a tree platform. Somehow “tree house” is more resonant of its origin, which is in every child's wish to have a tree house. I felt that childhood recognition immediately. The guy who runs the place, Nicholas Fox Weber, wanted a tree house and he got a one—forty years later. Fritz Horstman, who built it, also always wanted a tree house.

JRW Forty years later?

NM Well, like everyone he wanted it when he was a kid. Fritz, an artist who manages the grounds, and Andrés Garcés, who works with the Albers archive, built it four years ago, again not with painting in mind, more for relaxation.

JRW Is being up high and painting different than painting on the ground?

NM When you're up here, on this large oval platform, you feel very secure, which is kind of strange, because you're halfway up a tree. Your eye level is mid-level to all the other trees. It's not really that you are dealing with the height above ground; you're dealing with the fact that you're in the middle of trees, looking across. It is experientially interesting. Normally, when you're drawing trees, sitting on the ground, you're always kind of going from the earth upwards, whereas here you're going from the middle of a trunk, down and up. And you're completely in 360 degrees. I'm used to working in landscape from my truck as a studio, where your back was always covered by the rear of the truck and you only had one view out a narrow door; when I'm painting here, I'm aware of the full 360, which is amazing—looking at the back when you're painting the front. You're always aware of both.

JRW Does that affect the way that the works look? Is the viewer aware that the back is exposed?

NM No. It's not necessarily how that manifests itself in accuracy of drawing or painting. What interests me is the fact that I've noticed it, and some mark has happened with that awareness.

JRW Is all the work that you've done in Connecticut made in the tree house?

NM Absolutely everything. I haven't been anywhere else for seven weeks. I just use the 'real' studio in the evening to assemble the day's work. I considered going down and painting the tree house from the ground, but I don't think I want to. What interests me, when you look out here, is that the distance and the density of what you're looking at—and the complexity—is completely visually absorbing.

JRW One thing that's interesting is that, in the truck, you had a fixed viewpoint; you always had the frame. But you moved the truck around. Here, you're in one place, but you move around. You turn around 360 degrees.

NM It was a complete liberation, because I was tiring of that structure of viewing in the truck. The truck was like a camera, and I'd just start painting whatever I opened the doors upon. But I couldn't find a way beyond that. In this last year I've left it idle. I might go back to it, but I no longer care so much about the viewfinder. Eventually, the device becomes too familiar. And it stops you seeing. It's the opposite of how it was in the beginning. Initially, the device of the truck door allowed me to see, but after ten years, it stopped me seeing.

I think what's begun to interest me here is the weaving of the jigsaw of vision. I've been here seven weeks so far, working on one piece, plus ancillary studies. But the main piece is a 360-degree view from the tree house, working in segments adding pieces like a jigsaw each day, around the clock, and around the clock again. I like that sense of being in the middle of nature, but on a platform, a manmade structure. What became interesting to me here was moving myself. As you said, it wasn't like moving the truck and changing my vision, but of me choosing the next bit to look at.

JRW But there's more than 360 degrees, because it's also 180 degrees over your head.

NM It's a 'spheroid' with a flat bottom, because you can't really see below the floor underneath you. Above you, you're completely aware of the canopy. It's the roof of the tree house. In fact, for the first time, I've really become aware of a sculptural issue in relation to painting. If I'm looking and drawing, I'm seeing in three dimensions, obviously, but you can reasonably see how to work it in two dimensions. But dealing with being in the centre of the sphere definitely gave me sculptural issues, which is why the work has ended up in the particular form that it's currently in; it has two peaks to it, which, if you folded it in together, would sort of close the canopy; a rough solution.

JRW Are the smaller vertical works, which were the first works that you made here in Connecticut, just scenes from various parts of the edge of the tree house?

NM They're the beginnings of the idea of doing the 360. I made them as individual pieces that could join together. It was in the making of them that I got excited and thought, “I can put them together,” but those are actually individual pieces. It's been a learning curve. I'm only here on a relatively short residency, but I could paint here in this spot, I think, for two years without moving, because it just keeps changing every day. When I started, it was complete leaf cover, in green, but we had snow last week and ninety percent of the leaves are gone. So I've gone through the full color change, dealing with all of that, watching it. The woods here are not remarkable woods. It's a young forest. The trees aren't grand, they're thin, mostly no more than a hundred years old, black birch with some and red and white oak mixed in. The tree house itself is built between two big white pines, which feel older, or maybe just bigger.

JRW You said that you consciously rejected the idea of painting at the beautiful picturesque lake, in favor of painting these dense thickets of ordinary trees from the tree house.

NM I'd go for a walk in the evening by the lake, and absorb its beauty. It's a manmade lake—they call it Anni's lake, it's named after Josef Albers's wife—and it is absolutely fantastic. It's visually stunning, but it's too much for me. It's too beautiful. Wherever I've painted landscape, I haven't gone for the picturesque. It's not that I'm against it, but there's more interest in this; there's more visual complexity.

JRW Is it the avoidance of the cliché that enables you to talk about that jigsaw of vision?

NM Yes, and maybe it's also that you know nobody's done it quite this way, maybe because it's not interesting to most people. I think it's too complicated, or too simple! Most people give up on the fifty-fourth tree. Why would you keep going around the platform? It drives you bonkers. To me, the excitement of it is the platform, the tree house, as a place where I can attempt to be as present as I can in the forest, painting. So, it's a strange balance between being and doing. It's a real place of being, in the forest and the tree house. You open up to nature, and it's glorious, and you feel good, but you're also trying to make art. So the balance is the line between being and doing, and the work notates that. There are good days, there are bad days, there's bits where I'm paying attention, there's bits where I'm not, but the accumulation of that is the history of trying to be where I am, which is in the tree house, and look. It's a strange job.

JRW Is the conventional idea we have of the picturesque, like Anni's lake, beauty any longer? Or is beauty somewhere else?

NM In terms of art, beauty is somewhere else for me. In here, in the forest, like this, there's an investigation. You're looking, and there's a process you can engage in. I'm sure you can engage in the same at the lake, if you're somebody else, but not me; I couldn't do it. I like denseness and complexity. I've always backed my truck into the bush and tried to paint my way out. Often, I literally would park the truck purposely so that there was a bush coming into the studio, with leaves arriving at your eyeballs. But, I'm not a very good perspective painter at all. I can't do it technically, but I like the sense of having to face it.

JRW Is beauty something that interests you? Is it something you think about, or that you're concerned with?

NM I don't think I've ever thought about it, actually. I don't think about beauty, particularly when I'm working. If I see somebody attractive, or a view, I might think about it in passing, but not in terms of the landscape I

Below Tree House as working studio, Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, October 2009

Overleaf Tree House, Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, September 2009



am painting: then it's just a distraction. The tree house is beautiful, but not in the classic sense; it is a different thing. My paintings are not beautiful in the classical sense, either; the result is sometimes gunky and awkward.

JRW Does it come into play in your figure paintings?

NM Not really. Look at my portraits. They're not “beautiful” in terms of traditional representation, but I hope they're beautiful as paintings. The beauty is the making of life in two dimensions. That's the miracle and the alchemy, which interests me. That's beauty.

JRW For you, is landscape painting different than figure painting? Or is it the same?

NM No, they're the same, but figure painting is a quicker way to be present, because you're dealing with a person, a figure. It's more exciting. Trees, until you open up yourself to them, are quite stoic and uncommunicative. In the studio with a person, painting very quickly makes me pay attention to their presence, to being there while they're there, and also to the process, to the engagement of painting with them. Because they're alive, and human, that engagement just literally switches me on, as I have to pay attention then. That's why I see myself more than anything as a portrait painter, even though I don't show portraits often.

JRW Are you making portraits of trees?

NM Not really in this context. I'm making a portrait of a tree house, of being in a tree house. It's a portrait of place, to a degree. But, I don't know if that's just all guff...

THE JIGSAW OF VISION

Nick Miller in conversation with Joseph R Wolin



JRW Your paintings and their surfaces are full of complexity and density, in the way you described this landscape that we're looking at now.

NM I suppose that's why it suddenly hit me: here I am, home again! While sitting here, I recalled as a kid cutting school and going to the woods near where we lived in London; I used to sit for hours on a fallen trunk in the middle of the forest, aimlessly waiting for life to happen. Finding that memory made sense of trees for me, and of being in this tree house in Connecticut. I haven't had an experience like these seven weeks in a long time. Early on in the truck, when I found myself on the top of a mountain, on my own, in the parts of Sligo that nobody ever goes, I'd be there all day long, and I'd be dancing outside my truck with joy at the kind of strange experience of it. I had a similar feeling here. Finding the space to adapt as a studio in 'nature', in which I can be, and be a painter, was incredibly joyous, in the sense of making work. I almost don't give a shit what the painting looks like, but the process of making, seeing, doing and being here gave me such a thrill, a literal thrill that I couldn't sleep some nights, I was just too excited. Then I'd be tired and have to snooze the next day on the wooden furniture in the tree house to be fit to continue painting. So although I did not spend the night up here, I was often experiencing the strange sensations of falling asleep and waking up in the woods.

JRW Earlier, you were talking about seeing yourself as a Sunday painter gone out of control. Would you comment on that?

NM I didn't go through Art College; I studied Development Studies, including, amongst other disciplines, politics, and economics at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich. I never trained as an artist, but always painted. Early on that leaves you on the edge of an art world, with the fantasies of the Sunday painter. What they beat out every innocent entering the system is that Sunday painter: the spark of hope and delusion about work, which Sunday painters have, as being good, meaningful and passionate, like Van Gogh, all those things that you want to be. Maybe I could have faced an art education somewhere like Black Mountain College, North Carolina, where Albers first taught in the USA, after he came straight from Hitler's Germany, and before he settled in Connecticut. That sounded like an amazing place, an open-minded interdisciplinary experiment, where you had to do the gardening too! I think I would have liked that.

JRW Is it naïveté?

NM Maybe it's a touch of naïveté, but while I can't pretend to be naïve, I have kept that little spark of innocence protected at the heart of me, which would probably have been pulverized in an arts establishment. In a way, you don't quite fit into the system ever after, but I kept it, and kept at it. That bit of me, which I always refer back to, the Sunday painter, likes simply to paint what he looks at. I have also taught, since, and I've taught that type of person, and there's a bit I recognize in them always, which is a kind of defiance that what they're doing, and what they're looking at, is of value. And it is of value, because what they're doing is meaningful to them. Of course that does not mean it's good!

JRW In the twenty-first century, when there's just not as much landscape as there used to be, landscape has a different charge than it used to. It's something that's vanishing and that needs to be protected from us. Does any of that find its way into your paintings?

NM No, absolutely none of it. The closest thing in my work would be my attempts to be present, and a witness, in nature for myself. If we're unconscious, that's when we do damage. If you look at politics, and economics, and everything, the reason for trouble in the world is unconscious human behavior. It's our biggest disease, people acting without awareness, true awareness.

With the truck, initially, it was a vehicle for me to be literally in nature like that. It was a similar vehicle to this, the tree house. Now, if I stayed in the tree house ten years, I'd have the same problems. Everything develops and becomes a structure. You can't stay in the same thing; you have to find a new way. But what I realized I was missing recently in the truck was that sense of presentness. I was just painting, and, painting per se doesn't interest me at all. I know everybody talks about painting being about painting now, all that kind of stuff. It isn't. For me, painting isn't about painting. Painting is about trying to be in the world, as a person.

JRW The word "presentness" is interesting here in this location, because it was used by the early American cleric Jonathan Edwards, who lived in New England, in Massachusetts, in the eighteenth century. He wrote, "Presentness is grace," a line that was taken up later, by

Michael Fried at the end of his essay "Art and Objecthood," the classic essay about Minimalist art and Color Field Painting. Is there a religious aspect to your idea of presentness?

NM I'm not a religious person. But, by even approaching presentness, you start to experience something resembling connection to the world. That leads you to what people might, in various terms, call a sense of spirit, or the other thing that is the world, other than all the practical day-to-day stuff. I'm not much of a practitioner of anything, except, I suppose, painting. Words such as "spiritual" and "God" feel devalued in our culture, so they become unconscious vehicles for trouble. The core of all these things is generally good; it's just what happens in human behavior that can end up bad.

I feel very un-alive if I'm not engaged in painting. Other people find other ways to be connected, but, just by chance, it's the way I found to be able to touch that kind of stuff. It's not always good, and it's not always right, and some of the best painting happens on the worst days, when you're least attentive. There's no hard-and-fast rule to what it all means. It's the willingness to turn up with a good intention, to give it another go. In the process of that, something happens. At points, I let go of all the things which otherwise occupy me, and I'm just there. Even if I don't let go, painting's a pretty good compensation of trying to let go—or not trying, trying not to try to let go. You get very convoluted! It is an odd business. I'm not a formalist, and I'm not an academic, and I have no theoretical basis; I'm an experiential painter, whatever that means.

JRW Is that, again, about being a Sunday painter?

NM In a way, it is, but a Sunday painter with attitude! There's something good in the heart of the Sunday painter, a pure intention, which can be somewhat sullied in the professional world of art. It becomes a different game, where you forget the meaning of life—where I forget the meaning of life. People have very different ways of going about it, and they end up with very interesting things. But in my version of events, I haven't found anything else that does it for me in the same way as painting. It's always been about making it alive, making it to do with life, not art. So much of art is about art, now. In a way, my riposte to that is my Sunday painting with attitude.

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