

# Ron Terada Conversation: Painting, Pathos and the Pictures Generation

WALTER PHILLIPS GALLERY, BANFF MAY 15 TO JUL 25 2010

by AMY FUNG



Ron Terada "Who I Think I Am" 2010 Installation view Courtesy Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre / photo Laura Vanags

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On May 13, artist [Ron Terada](#) gave a talk at the [Banff Centre](#) in advance of his exhibition "[Who I Think I Am](#)," a solo show that addresses painting, the image of the artist and pictures generation figures, particularly [Jack Goldstein](#). In this post-talk interview with critic [Amy Fung](#), Terada discusses art-world anxieties, genre mashups and the surprising way that Canadians view artists.

**Amy Fung:** Your *Jack* series marks a return to painting after a 10-year absence. In your artist talk you mentioned that your earlier paintings marked where you stood in the art world. How so?

**Ron Terada:** Maybe they marked where I would have liked to have found myself in the art world, or how I would like to have engaged in the art world. I first started making my [ad paintings](#) in 1993, when I was 23 or 24 years old.

**AF:** You've said these works are kind of portraits, but they're archival as well.

**RT:** I wanted them to function as documentation of a certain moment in time within the art world inasmuch as when you isolate a particular artist's name, it becomes a sort of portrait. My approach to painting comes out of minimalism, specifically the monochrome. But you don't want to just paint a monochrome—that seems really outdated. As much as that kind of work—where painting is about just being a painting—appeals to me, it just didn't cut it anymore, it needed to somehow represent something beyond itself. The art adverts I selected were already pretty minimal to begin with, yet they represented this other moment in time.

**AF:** Now it's 17 years later, and you have a series of paintings here in Banff based word-for-word on the autobiography of Jack Goldstein. Is this a return to earlier themes for you, like the singular figure of the artist or monochromatic painting?

**RT:** I was always interested in the pictures generation of artists, but when you lay it out like that, it was never so determined. When I read the book *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* in 2003, I didn't think Jack's story would be paintings in 2010. It was just one of those instances when you recall something and you come back to it for whatever reason.

And for me, it came at a time when I was in a funk. Call it a mid-life or mid-career crisis. That's certainly what it felt like to paint again.

**AF:** The chapter you've painted has the theme that everything will be okay so long as you sell a few paintings...

**RT:** But obviously that plan ran out of gas as Jack's substance abuse got worse and worse.

**AF:** Is there an irony in using this down-and-out figure of Jack—who really wanted to succeed in the art world and didn't—in a way that will further your own career in the art world?

**RT:** I don't quite look at it that way. I think in some ways the anxieties and social dynamics of the art world in his story—his relations with other artists, curators, collectors and critics—tap into all of these roles that go unheard. Yet these are roles that shape and define this idea of the art world, things which I've been fascinated with since the beginning of my practice. Jack's story delves into those specific conditions deeply and candidly.

**AF:** Jack is an underdog in this world, is he not?

**RT:** But it's weird, too, as the guy just had [a retrospective in Frankfurt](#). Those artists are being rediscovered, and yet he just couldn't manage to hang on. That's where this element of sadness comes into the story.

**AF:** Jack's narrative is not your own. Is there anything, though, that you feel a personal affinity with his story?

**RT:** By borrowing Jack's words, I wasn't replicating my own feelings or position. Like in my early paintings, I'm interested in documentation, portraiture, even history painting. Formally, I'm trying to bring in two genres that really shouldn't coexist together. In Jack's time, if you pursued monochrome painting, it just had to be about itself. That's being a purist in the Greenbergian sense, but thankfully we're past that.

The initial catalyst for the exhibition was to organize a selected-works or survey show, but what I found interesting was that we were creating a decentered type of show, where each venue [venues also include the [Ikon Gallery](#) and the [Barnicke Gallery](#)] is its own unique show. This is played out further in the title of the show, "Who I Think I Am," and the resulting catalogue. Identity or identities are very elusive and never static, and distinctions are blurred.

**AF:** There's a resistance to reading the paintings optically; the white text on black in each makes you very aware that it is a painting and that it's a difficult story to read or read into.

**RT:** It was important that I wasn't just pulling pages out of a book and pinning them to a wall. For me, Jack's story is the story of painting. I don't want to reduce Jack's story to a cliché, but typically when one thinks of the tragic artist, it's a painter. All artists are aware of that story, whether they admit it or not. Every artist has their anxiety about how to negotiate their own practice, not just within a particular moment, but over the long haul. And yet it's not about the solitary artist with their shirt off, with a hairy stick, making something. There's this other type of production or professionalization of production that's going on.

**AF:** No matter how we approach art, we still fall into disciplines. Even if the discipline is now interdisciplinary, people still hold onto ideas of being painters or sculptors. Not all people, but that mentality still exists.

**RT:** That's why selecting Jack as a subject for painting makes sense. People still believe in the romantic artist that maybe you're alluding to. I think that's why Jack's story, even if it is very specific, has a broader appeal, because typically people want to see the artist as a tragic loser, especially in Canada. It's more dignified to be an artist in Europe, you're taken a bit more seriously. In Canada, if you tell someone you're an artist, they look at you like you're a freak.