IN CONVERSATION:
Claire Oswalt and Alexandra Schwartz

The following conversation between Claire Oswalt and Alexandra Schwartz (curator, Museum of Arts and Design, New York) took place on November 5, 2024. The transcript has been condensed and revised for clarity.

Alexandra Schwartz: Could you describe the work that you're going to be showing at the gallery next year?

Claire Oswalt: Sure. I see them as a bit of an exhale after a really tough start to the year. The studies basically fell out of me. They're airy and buoyant – some of them relate to landscapes. The works here in my studio are still a bit in progress. I might change the borders on some, but you get the gist of what's going on.

AS: It looks like they're a little more figural than some of the work I've seen before.

CO: They vary quite a bit because I try not to put too many limitations on the compositions when I'm making them. This one is titled *Slipstone*.

Those works are the three I have in this studio. I work at the Charles Moore Foundation [in Austin, Texas] and so I am in a very post-modern space. I have bizarre layers of things all around me. It's fun that I get to work in a space with absolutely no rules or limitations.

AS: I have read a little bit about your process of making the study and then the larger work. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about how you developed that way of working? Is it connected to the way studies were done back in the Renaissance or did you arrive at it in a different way?

CO: I began working this way in a time of transition when I was switching over from very representational work. Once I had children, the time frame for the drawings did not work for me anymore. I needed to continue to create, and thought 'how am I going to do that?'

I was getting back into making work after having my first child, and I received a chance at a commission that required me to make 386 line drawings, but I was pregnant with my second child. I thought, 'I just don't know if I have this in me physically,' so the night before the presentation, I started working really quickly, making watercolors, tearing them up, and then rearranging them in collage form.

I got the job, then had to make 386 collages! It was a chance to learn a new medium and how to work in a new way. It's evolved and grown from there. They were very raw back then and over time the process got more refined. I start by making quick marks on paper that I don't think about very much… and they accumulate over time so some exist from other time periods, and could be two years old, some are made that day so it's kind of like this ever-evolving record... I then cut those pieces up and sit down to make the studies. I let go… I let the process take over. It can be immediate or it can take hours and hours. If something does start to arise, imagery of some kind, I know and trust that's where I'm going. Then I start to refine it.

You mentioned studies from the Renaissance – I think those were so intentional and they knew where they were going, they had a plan. There is no plan or narrative whatsoever with my studies, and that's really because there is no form or narrative that I'm seeking. I rely on that nothingness, that spontaneity of discovery, if that makes sense.

AS: Correct me if this is pushing it more than you intend, but I also have two young kids and finding a way to work that is efficient and that fits into the rest of your life is so difficult. And this seems like both an intuitive and ingenious way to go about that.

CO: I think a lot of it was luck… I went back to making art after having children with absolutely no expectations. I think it enabled a major shift in perspective.

AS: Do you feel that it was liberating in terms of your priorities or how you were structuring your time? What do you think it was that freed up your expectations and your way of working?

CO: A shift in priorities and it was also a move from Los Angeles and New York to Austin. It wasn't in my face the whole time – this excellence, this ambition, this competition. I really needed that physical space, and space in my head, and space to ponder and reflect. To meander and figure things out.

AS: Tell me more about your work with textiles. Do you feel that your quilting work in terms of design might have had an influence on your work now? Do those two projects fit together in some way?

CO: The quilting company I had was with a friend of mine who is also an artist. She always sewed our prototypes. I didn't even know how to sew then. But yes, there is a lot of crossover. I am not afraid to rip entire sections out,

ditch them, and start again. It also gave me the backbone of my work, the structure of the seams, which is just one system underlying another. I see the world as these co-existing networks that link up in particular places before they wind about in their own separate ways again. Science and spirituality. Nature and architecture. There are so many examples.

AS: Your process is much more direct than I realized.

CO: I wanted to scale them with paper, but found the paper to be so unruly. I was getting frustrated, and then I thought, 'I'm just going to sew these.' They started off much simpler than they are now, and as my sewing improved, I was able to make these crazy turns. Now they follow the study very faithfully. I go from a process that is rooted in intuition, wonder, and mystery to one that is exacting in execution.

AS: Are you sewing canvas?

CO: It's raw unprimed canvas.

AS: That's not so easy to sew I would think.

CO: It's not easy. And if I had learned to sew in a traditional way there is no way I would have discovered this. It was out of complete ignorance. I thought, 'I'm just going to dive in.'

AS: Do you know Nina Yankowitz's early sailcloth works? I wrote about them a couple years ago. She moved away from it, but in the early 70s, she was living in downtown New York and there were still all these places that made sails for boats. She became really fascinated with them and she made these textile works using sailcloth. She used draping as well as accordion-pleating techniques to create three-dimensional forms that hung on the wall. She would also paint on the sailcloth, often with the same gestural aspect to them as your works.

CO: This reminds me of Helen Frankenthaler's sister, Gloria Ross, who commissioned artists and made tapestries out of their work.

AS: Really? I didn't know that.

CO: I've made a number of tapestries. They are all still based on a study, but executed in a different medium. I've also done works in marble, which took the same idea of separating pieces of paper that I would map out into cuts of marble. I'm super interested in creating a system and then reworking it in different ways. Tauba Auerbach is inspiring for me, and the way she keeps reworking systems and forms. For her it's re-envisioning the double helix.

AS: How long have you been making the sewn works?

CO: Six years.

AS: You mentioned Helen Frankenthaler. Your palette and the way you're using the pigment reminds me of her. Who are the artists that are important to you? Who do you think about on a regular basis?

CO: A lot of people mention Frankenthaler when they talk about my work, and while I absolutely adore her, I don't think about her that often. She worked in such a different

way. Laura Owens has always been an inspiration. I love her radical turns. She doesn't seem tied down by anything and I love the way she layers imagery. I also know she was inspired by [Francis] Picabia who is also important for me. His paintings on top of paintings, especially of two different styles – it goes back to those overlapping systems for me. I look to Luc Tuymans a lot, especially the way he obscures the familiar into abstraction. I really like artists who dance on the edge of the familiar, but are able to push into a strange, unexplored space. Martin Puryear falls into that category, as does Louise Bourgeois, at least with some of her work. I always come back to the elegance of Martin Puryear. The bizarre quality of those organic forms. Elizabeth Peyton, Sophie Tauber-Arp, Forrest Bess…. this could go on forever!

AS: When you're making one of your works, I assume you paint on the canvas before you cut it?

CO: No. I cut them in pieces larger than they're going to be cut. I have individual squares that I'm working with.

AS: Is there a moment where you're ever cutting up or cutting through something you've made? How does that feel?

CO: Terrible, but exciting. It's funny you bring that up. I mentioned Picabia and his layering of paintings over paintings. For me there is also this idea of editing or "killing your babies," as they say in literature, that is present when I cut into a piece. The margin of error has to be so small for it to work because I work within a half inch of seam allowance. It's exciting and terrifying. I think there's more of that in my future. Right now, I'm thinking more about pulling the canvas out of the canvas. I have made a few pieces where I drape canvas, where it becomes three-dimensional, but is still sewn in. I think there will be more of that line of thinking. I'm really inspired by new ways to push this process forward. I will get bored if I don't continue to evolve!

AS: That makes sense to me because I noticed that you seem to think about painters, but you are working in three dimensions.

CO: Right. I rarely think about sculptors. I guess I mentioned Puryear, but no, it's the painters. Joan Brown…

I've learned the studies are my way of cobbling towards an image. I really believe that I am some sort of conduit during these moments when I'm making the studies. I think it's my desire to stay true to that moment of pure, unadulterated creation.

AS: It's such an interesting contrast that the studies are so spontaneous and then you are making a very precise work from the study. It seems like it's two halves of your brain.

CO: I grew up with a mother and grandmother who are both painters and a dad who's a surgeon. It's eerie, the direct relationships.

AS: You've got the art half and the surgery half!

CO: We were talking about spontaneity and the seemingly opposing opposites between the studies and the finished works…I find that theme of opposition carries throughout my work, especially in regard to sewing. If you sew curves,

you're sewing a concave and a convex thing together. That's an overarching theme for me: this push and pull and finding the balance between two systems or modes of working. There is also a feeling of coming apart in my work, mostly through the exaggerated explosive markings, but then you have the coming together of the sewn seams.

AS: I am curious about your titles. How do you come up with them? They're very poetic.

CO: I thought I was going to be a writer and I feel like words are very much a part of my practice. Music is really important to me as well.

AS: What music do you listen to?

CO: People ask me this all the time and I'm like, 'Anything good!' I am not limited to one genre. Things will shift throughout the day. I'm really into 70s African music right now. I'm back in a jazz moment…Chet Baker is playing a lot. Towards the end of the day, I listen to my ever-growing playlist called String Theoreez with a "z." It's all strings, all classical. I also grew up on country music in Texas, so I'll play some real twangy stuff as well. I find if I'm moving to it, I know I'm on the right path, I know I'm in my body and not in my head.

AS: What else have you been thinking about in relation to this new body of work?

CO: I'm really interested in physics, but on a super amateur level. Lately I've been thinking about how I want to honor a particular moment of creation because I'm completely fascinated with why I choose the particular pieces and position them the way I do. Quantum physics is a representation of possibility, not an actual picture of reality, but of possibility. It's been 13.8 billion years of possible choices, of free will, some that have brought me to this very moment…I have so much respect for that moment. It is way outside of myself and so much bigger than me.

I keep thinking about why I choose what I choose and what are the influences acting upon me to choose these pieces to form this thing? It's fascinating to me and totally bizarre.

AS: You seem very interested in what the structure is behind the spontaneity: what forms the basis of it.

CO: I think it makes sense because my work is layer upon layer of quick spontaneous mark-making. I listen to a lot of podcasts on philosophy, consciousness, and quantum physics. I only retain a percentage of it, but I've learned that there are also limitations in quantum physics…there's so much mystery and so much that they cannot make sense of. The math just fails at some point. The idea of mystery beyond is something I want to dive into further.

AS: That makes sense with your background in design and the tension between the improvisational and then seeing the patterns and the structure behind what you've done. Do you feel like what you're learning about quantum physics is coming out in your work or is it more in how you're thinking about your process?

CO: I think it's more in how I'm thinking about my process and a mindset. I am trying to give into it, let go, and see what

happens because I believe there's some divine order or design that is at play. They have ideas of what it means to be conscious, how we can connect to a greater unified energy field through our body, but consciousness itself does not come from our body. I am in awe of this idea that we exist as humans, but don't even really know who we are or how our brains function and perceive the world. I am interested in how this mind expansion will affect art movements on a larger scale. I'm interested in what is beyond the algorithms and the explainable. I'm interested in the limits – where information cannot fill in the blanks. To me, that's magical.

Claire Oswalt is an artist who lives and works in Austin, Texas. Oswalt creates sweeping and expansive paintings and collages informed by minimalism, abstraction, and the unique landscape of Central Texas. She received her BFA from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

She has had solo exhibitions at Overduin & Co., Los Angeles (2024); Broadway Gallery, New York (2024; 2023); Rebecca Camacho Presents, San Francisco (2025; 2022; 2020); Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin (2020); Octavia Gallery, Houston (2018); and Johanssen Gallery, Berlin, Germany (2017); amongst others. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Landing Gallery, Los Angeles (2022); Broadway Gallery, New York (2021); Rebecca Camacho Presents, San Francisco (2020); Tappan Collective, Los Angeles (2016); and Chamber, New York (2015); amongst others. She received a grant from the Peter S. Reed Foundation (2011).

Alexandra Schwartz is a curator and historian of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, design, and visual culture. She received her PhD in the History of Art from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and a Bachelor of Arts (AB) in the History of Art and Architecture from Harvard University.

Schwartz has organized a number of exhibitions, including the critically acclaimed *Garmenting: Costume as Contemporary Art* (2022) at the Museum of Arts and Design, the first global survey dedicated to the use of clothing as a medium of visual art. Her exhibition credits also include: *52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone* at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (2022–23); *Ed Ruscha: OKLA* at Oklahoma Contemporary (2021); *As in Nature: Helen Frankenthaler Paintings* at The Clark Art Institute (2017); and *Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s* at the Montclair Art Museum and with a national tour (2015-16). She is the author of *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (MIT Press, 2010) and the co-editor of *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* (MoMA, 2010).

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Front Cover:

Claire Oswalt
Prelude in Green, 2024
Acrylic on sewn canvas
55 × 64 inches
139.7 × 162.6 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Rebecca Camacho Presents, San Francisco

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