

The background is an abstract composition of thick, textured brushstrokes in three primary colors: green, yellow, and red. The green strokes are on the left side, the yellow strokes are on the top right, and the red strokes are at the bottom. The strokes are layered and overlap, creating a sense of depth and movement. The text 'Golden Age' is written in white, cursive script in the upper right quadrant, overlapping the yellow and green areas.

Golden
Age

Conversations: Nathalie Provosty, Keith J. Varadi, Christopher K. Ho

In August 2013, Christopher K. Ho invited artists Keith J. Varadi and Nathalie Provosty to talk about their work, with specific focus on their thoughts about the generation who came of age in the '90s, conservatism, and abstract painting. Ho sat down with Varadi and Provosty separately. What follows is a parallel conversation.

CKH: I've been trying to get into the minds of 26-year-olds. One disturbing observation is that desires seem immediately verbalized, if not quite externalized as demands. There is little discretion, less self-discipline. The old avant-garde pursuit of the *new* transforms into gratification *now*.

KJV: Well, another thing that's happening with my generation is that more people are going to graduate school than ever before. They are receiving knowledge and information and education, and everything is becoming more streamlined and classified. And institutions like the New Museum or the Hammer Museum want

CKH: I've been trying to get into the minds of 26-year-olds. One of the most disturbing things is the desire for immediate gratification. There's no distance. Ten years ago, irony pervaded art. When did we lose if not specifically ironic distance then self-conscious distance from what we do?

NP: I had a discussion with Daniel Baird, a writer, about a year ago [Summer 2012], and I asked him what he thought about irony in a painting. He said, "Well, I think about it like irony in a person. I can meet someone who is ironic, but I don't feel like I really want to get to know them because you feel like they're pushing you

to break the “next big thing.” They want to do so at rapid rates that mimic how the rest of the world operates. If you wait too long, you’ll end up looking like a crusty fart, asking: “The past two years have been dominated by painting; what’s that all about?”

CKH: Are you calling me a crusty fart?

KJV: No, but art historians often have a skewed take on art-making. I don’t think you do because you hang out with artists and you make art. Lane Relyea doesn’t either. He is an incredibly smart guy who has a strong background in academia, but also hangs out with a lot of artists. I think art historians often seek mile markers; it’s all about theses. You and Relyea and many of your peers were educated with all of these perpetuated ideas rooted in semiotics, commodification, etc. Now you are trying to make artists of my generation into commodities.

CKH: That’s terrible!

KJV: But that’s what you guys are doing. For all of the accusations about my generation being conservative, it is the people writing about us who

away.” If you have a real relationship with someone it’s not going to be ironic. I mean, who knows what real is, but in this case I think it’s connected to a broader desire for intimacy. Another characteristic of our culture—which seems very much connected and possibly proportionate to technological development—is rampant depression. And with it a longing to feel connected, hence all the “technology as relationship,” the social media.

CKH: I certainly see intimacy in so-called relational work, but if there’s a new sense of intimacy in painting, where is it happening?

NP: I think it’s happening in the realm of desire. I don’t know if it’s happening but I think it’s being sought after. Think of the idea of absorption versus vacuousness. Both are spaces of lost time. When you come out of absorption you feel connected, more filled, more alive. When you come out of vacuousness, from watching a bad TV show or something, you feel depressed, bad, or blank. I think they are very closely tied; they share the same image but different content. Yet, technology is just a tool. The variable is experience.

are really conservative. “These are the Provisional Painters; these are the Post-Internet artists; these are the this; these are the that...” But maybe we’re not the things they say we are. Having said that, I have absolutely no real issue with art writing or cultural criticism. I obviously think it’s essential. I am routinely publishing essays and reviews myself. I just want writers to hold themselves to the same standards to which they claim to hold those who they write about. And of course you need to coin some sort of term or catchphrase in order to prove your point. But why do so many of the ones that gain traction seem so regressive or stifling, you know?

CKH: But surely it can’t be a sprawling mess, or worse, a bunch of individuals pursuing their own personal projects.

KJV: Right, it can’t be. You once referred to my personal projects as idiosyncratic. I do all of these idiosyncratic projects, as you say, as an individual artist, and then I do further idiosyncratic projects with two co-collaborators as Picture Menu, a group of artists comprised of myself, my girlfriend Rachel LaBine, and my best friend Michael Kennedy Costa.

CKH: How do you distinguish the desire for intimacy from mere desire and gratification?

NP: As with the difference between the post-experiences of absorption versus vacuousness, maybe you only know afterwards.

CKH: I’m really glad you are participating because your work doesn’t fit into any of the three models described by Lane Reylea, David Geers, or Gregory Sholette, or the unspoken model, provisional painting. Plus you’re not quite of the generation I’m discussing. Would you describe perception as an underlining guideline of your work?

NP: Well, I have read other artists’ comments about what they do. In “Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees” by Lawrence Weschler, Robert Irwin states perception as his main preoccupation. For him it is primarily about looking very carefully. Beuys also used the word perception, as a way to democratize his idea of social sculpture. So, the word means totally different things to them. Perception, yes I resonate, as a form of awareness.

CKH: Attentiveness?

Michael and I first met in graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University. We put together a group show called *Exit Light* at Reference Gallery down in Richmond. Once we settled into New York in 2011, we put together a couple of more shows, and then Rachel came on board.

All three of us have worked for artists or galleries and have been able to see the most recent market boom from various perspectives. Additionally, we started seeing a lot of things presenting themselves as D.I.Y. Part of my problem was that these guises of D.I.Y. were conformist by default—something that Relyea establishes in “D.I.Y. Abstraction.” I began to take note of a number of signifiers of D.I.Y. practices in general, whether they pertained to art spaces that almost exclusively showed their friends, artists making “scrap-py” objects, or poetry presses that were putting out chapbooks. But a lot of these operations were using what seemed like manipulative moves of going beyond their immediate peer group, attempting to work with certain artists or writers, with the hopes or expectations of the favor being returned—a *quid-pro-quo* model

NP: Attentiveness is rooted in attention, and I relate attention with “to be given attention” or “to attend to.” So that carries a residue of wanting and getting from the world, which is a very predatory, capitalistic mentality. Participating in the world—even on a social or political level—is innate on some level, and could be vivid if you choose it, but this is a different topic. I’m concerned with having the work hold a space of hopefully initiating experience rather than wanting or getting, rather than it making demands.

CKH: There’s this great essay by Thierry de Duve about the ethics of modern art. He talks about modern works proposing, “This is Art” and allowing the viewer to accept or reject the proposition. What you’re saying resonates with that argument. I bring this up because often the complaint about abstract painting today is that it seems so foreign to someone of my generation or my background, where we’re steeped in a desire to see art engage in something that is, if not outright political, at least polemical. I wonder if you see your paintings proposing an alternative term to politics, like ethics?

that made me wary. There was no progress; there was just this stagnant pond.

CKH: A lack of ambition... Being happy with showing your friends...

KJV: Like being a popular local band and never going on tour. In contrast, when I ask somebody to be in a show, I try to make it clear that I want to put together a show that I want to see. I want other people to see work that I think ought to be seen, and I want to have a discourse with people whose work and ideas I admire. I would rather have a challenging show or a super sexy, weird show that makes you actually think rather than have everything “just be okay.”

Things are more complicated than the narrow definition of D.I.Y. that young artists have come to understand these days—having your own studio, stretching your own canvas, gessoing the surfaces yourself, and applying the paint yourself. Personally, I don't really feel so comfortable with the idea of doing it yourself. I like teamwork. I like collaboration. I'd just prefer not to do anything where there are considerable strings attached, which by de-

NP: To me, the term has to create its own terms depending on what the work needs, which is part of the process of an artist creating what he does. In the case of morality I prescribe to Chris Burden's ideas on the topic, that art-making is essentially amoral. Of course ethics are different than morality because they grapple with society, with the question of impinging on other people's freedom (or what we currently recognize as freedom) and the consequences of doing so. As far as my work, I recognize that subtlety is slow but potentially more memorable than a kind of descriptive, overt representation. Immediate results are a bias of our time. The possibility of changing a viewer's perception of a work of art, or his or her life over a long span, is a potential of painting, or any other form that is carried out convincingly.

CKH: That idea of slowness extends to your process. Your show *Violets Violence Silence* [Gallery Diet, Miami, June 2013] felt incredibly, deeply researched.

NP: Up until a few months before *Book of Hours* [1:1, New York, November 2012] and on to that show, I had been work-



Nathalie Provosty, *Subject Without a Skin*, 2013. Oil on linen, 84" x 96".

fault, often leads me to do things myself.

Though, if I think of my participation in Picture Menu—this notion of a D.I.Y. mentality is interesting because we're really not doing anything ourselves. We're doing it with each other, we're doing it with other artists, and we're doing it at other spaces. We're inviting other artists to participate with us, and not approaching a show as us picking three or four artists and putting some objects in a space. We're approaching it as a strange, malleable collaboration between a physical space and us, the artists involved, as well as the public.

CKH: Right, I get it. But isn't Relyea's thesis precisely that capitalism in its recent "third spirit" instrumentalizes individualism and the artistic, authentic subject?

KJV: If you see someone's resume, it's expected that they went to this undergraduate program, then this graduate program, and then showed at this type of gallery. These expectations hinder an artist's ability to foster individualism. I truly do believe in trying to cultivate your own character. Relyea mentions craft breweries

ing with what paint itself does and how it reflects and interacts with changing lighting conditions. To stretch time in directions beyond the present and future, the work needed to address history. I researched hundreds, thousands of images. The process became about finding visual resonances between historically or culturally distant images, and about discovering relationships between structure and content. For example, in Jean de Beaumetz's *Christ on the Cross with a Carthusian Monk*, the three Marys in mourning formed an amazing curve, indicating simultaneously one Mary in the process of mourning. Though the formal manifestation would be the circle in this case, the translation of source image to painting image is not literal, but a mind process. You can create connections about how rhythms and melodies work. A rhythm is very modern. It's regularized, a heart beat, very gut, and related to Paleolithic and indigenous aesthetics. Melody is more lyrical, less predictable. I've made paintings that are either rhythmic or melodic, and have been working to combine the two because there's a contradiction, complication, making it even more alluring to pursue.

and all of this other shit happening where I live in Brooklyn, where some dude with a sheep is making his own wool sweaters on Wythe. That's not true individualism or autonomy. It's a bullshit cop-out, and an example of the neo-liberalism Relyea talks about. That neo-liberalism is actually pushing us back into conformity. It's like what happened with neo-conservatism, where political thinking went so far to the left that it came around to extreme right-wing politics. The same thing is happening with this notion of D.I.Y.

CKH: Let's talk about the Internet, which Relyea's "D.I.Y. Abstraction" doesn't fully address.

KJV: I have a problem with the watered-down idea of how the Internet and smart phones and so forth "rot the brains of the youth." First, I would argue that this isn't just a problem with my generation—I see people who are my aunt's age focusing on their iPhone instead of focusing on the coffee they are supposed to be getting from the barista, you know? Second, it is much more complex than "technology is dark, technology is a distraction." Some artists actually benefit from the fact that there is so

CKH: If the rhythm is, I don't know, the gridding or some structure that underlies, what would be the melody?

NP: The color vibrations. They subvert the monumentality of the drawing. Another thing I looked at is, how do people think about chance? I've been seeing a lot of work lately that is really reliant on all kinds of chance factors—as Lane Relyea describes in his essay "D.I.Y. Abstraction"—that are not conscious, not chosen in a deliberate fashion. I love when Mallarmé writes: "The inner structures of a book of verse must be inborn; in this way, chance will be totally eliminated and the poet will be absent." Bruce Nauman also used chance to create distance within the structure of a very strong method. Cage too, but these artists were inventing a form through control of the context. Of all the dirty tarp painting I've seen lately, maybe there was a first discovery, but the multitude and similarity I see now reflects a monotone engagement with thinking.

CKH: Is there anything old fashioned about the consciousness you mention?

much stuff going on all the time. Older generations of artists might open new windows; artists of my generation are opening new tabs, and going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, between those tabs. You may ask, “Why not just open a new window and not a new tab, focus on the article on *Gawker* or on whatever website, read that article, and then go to the next article?” I would respond: “Well, here’s the thing, Chris: what that article on *Gawker* was talking about is really related to what this article on *Salon* is talking about, which is related to this article on *Grantland*. And if I’m trying to make a connection between *Grantland* and *Salon*, I may need *Gawker* in between.”

CKH: That’s very frustrating for me because it bespeaks a lack of discipline as well as a lack of focus. And it does not explain the contemporaneousness of D.I.Y. abstraction, as well as other kinds of abstract painting, and the Internet.

KJV: I would argue that the focus has merely shifted, and thus, so have the methodologies of seeking and sharing. But painting has always been and will always be of the time. People who keep thinking that

NP: The word “consciousness” hasn’t been fully understood because it historically has religious or modern implications of unity and inwardness. But the word also means “mind in the broadest possible sense.” I’ve been thinking about complexity, disharmony, contradiction. A friend Chloé Rossetti recently shared with me her having read that in our current age, beginning with the Enlightenment, then the Industrial Revolution, and now this technological revolution, minds are explicitly, physically different than they were in the Medieval Period. I am interested in the participation of making new mind, recognizing that our speeds are different, our computing, computational skills are innately different.

CKH: So you’re taking consciousness, jettisoning its enlightenment roots, and thinking of its present iteration. Is this a way of countering the presumed conservatism of the medium of painting?

NP: Words have different inflections depending on the context within which they’re used. Jettisoning roots is impossible. When I think about what conservatism means, it indicates a unified and often

painting has died or is going to die soon—I feel like that’s a personal issue that a lot of artists or other art world people need to deal with on their own. Let’s be honest, painting is never going to die. It’s a matter of fact at this point. You know, people still play the piano...

CKH: True, but the past 15 years has witnessed a real renaissance of abstract painting, and it is difficult to reconcile that commitment to, or narrow focus on, a medium with the context of simultaneously open tabs. Painting just seems so not of our time, so conservative.

KJV: First, if you have recently moved to New York and are struggling to pay rent, and if you’re making delicate, dandyish small paintings in a 200-square-foot studio by yourself, that’s totally understandable. It doesn’t mean it’s necessarily thoughtful, rigorous, or interesting. But I think it’s important to remember that young artists are trying to balance all of their own issues, and they often feel like they can’t be bothered with all of these other depressing things. When I see a group show of a dozen or so paintings, hung salon-style, and I can’t differ-

dogmatic vision of how other people should be that is reactionary, reacting instead of acting. It’s anti-change, pro-status-quo. You want other people to think how you think, or you think what’s been thought already, without realizing it, a kind of neglect of history and other potentials that could keep things moving fluidly. Perhaps what you mean when you say conservative is you mean known. A known thing. Paint has this really ancient history and certain techniques are known. Maybe what you mean by not conservative is unknown. So then the question is by putting a medium into the category of “known” it negates the possibility of the “unknown” within it. Which is why I would say probably in most cases painting is conservative, or uninformed; but there are—and this would be because of one’s temperament or draw in the world—things you feel you must do, and without delusion. There is potential and it’s a risk, particularly in a medium that is known historically, and not metal and glass and flash. I think quality, of good painting, is defying of characterization on some level. It rises while ever-eluding.

CKH: Relyea doesn’t really discuss technology, speed, and

entiate who made what, it often screams: “Holy shit! I have to pay rent!” I empathize with these artists. But I am more interested in the artists who try to work through these issues, rather than those who seem to be satisfied with drinking PBR’s and patting their peers on their backs.

I think that is what separates an individual like Richard Aldrich from the pack. He is a painter who lives and works in Brooklyn like these other artists you’ve brought up. But the first time I saw his work, I could sense a serious level of ambition. It was a different kind of ambition, that’s for sure. But I could tell he wasn’t satisfied with simply being in fun shows with his buddies. His paintings are super quirky and personal, but also critical and confounding. Sure, there are examples of potential precedents such as Raoul de Keyser or Michael Krebber, who are often cited in making the case for lumping artists of our generation together to create some sort of trend or movement. However, I think it would be far wiser to look to the artist who Aldrich often cites himself, Daan van Golden, as a stronger precedent for him. Aldrich regularly quotes

media. Can you speak about the contemporariness of painting in the world you just described, populated with post-industrial, faster-paced minds?

NP: Yes, I’ve thought, what would the relationship of my work and technology be if there is one? In painting we see technology manifest in: First, the process of making the painting, although it may not be visible at the end. Plenty of people, like Peter Halley or much younger artists, design his or her paintings on the computer. In fact, David Reed has said that he makes a mark with paint, then puts it in the computer and manipulates it, then ends up painting the new mark, which looks more real than the original. Second, someone uses technology as a subject matter, which is visible in the painting, but it’s not a part of the process. The use of technology in this context becomes part of both subject and content. Now, what would be the third role of technology? And this is the part that is murky because inevitably with the speed and functioning of technology you have to have a dialectic, the inversion (and subversion). So I ask, what works against the speed



Keith J. Varadi, *Born Dead*, 2013.
Oil and canvas, 18" x 24".

him and not de Keyser or Kriebber for a reason. I think there is something much more conflicted in Aldrich's work than in de Keyser's, and something much more wrought than in Kriebber's. Like van Golden, there is an intuitive intellectualism present in his work. Unlike some have claimed, I don't think Aldrich's work is at all about failure, erasure, or any of these exhausted recent themes. It's not about being casual as Sharon Butler claims or provisional as Raphael Rubinstein does. Rather, I think it's more about flaunting awkwardness and the beautiful contradictions that can result from the surprising confidence it takes to do so. Furthermore, there is something about his practice that places the work somewhere between being literal and being literary. I really appreciate his approach to making art.

I wonder why more people don't talk about Daan van Golden. I guess it's probably because he is more difficult to pin down than most other artists. His work isn't so easily digestible upon first viewing (or second or third, maybe). He doesn't try to wow the viewer with imagery like many two-dimensional artists often try

and the image of technological experience? That's partially why, for example, I and probably many other painters make paintings, because the explicit non-reproducible qualities of them, I feel, are extremely important right now. Because they work against the prevailing trend.

In other words, just to surrender to what visual technology has to offer seems to me too literal, less complicated, and therefore less interesting ultimately. Technology has become a prosthetic. Think about people who have a prosthetic leg; it looks like a leg, but this model is really much less effective than one of those prosthetics that looks like a sword. [Laughs.] That's what the runners use. It's a super non-human, foreign-looking object, which catapults us into the difference between what looks like but is not and what does not look like but is. And this isn't even taking into account the amputated leg that still causes pain. These actual experiences of the body are metaphors or microcosms of human relationships with technology. And potentially painting.

CKH: Relyea's essay also implies

to do, nor does he lay things out for the viewer the way that conceptual artists have historically done. Aldrich wrote a really good piece on him in *Artforum* a while back. You should check it out if you haven't read it yet.

CKH: So what may seem like a lack of risk is in fact pragmatics?

KJV: I think people of your generation, Chris, were concerned with pragmatics. I think people of my generation are often unfortunately consumed by pragmatism. That is a major difference to keep in mind. Despite the constant accusations about my generation being entitled, I would argue that people of your generation tend to be entitled more so than many of those who are coming out of art school today. I know many New York artists of your generation who own an entire floor of a studio building and drive a sick Volvo. Young Brooklyn artists of my generation might be making paintings or drawings in their Bed-Stuy bedroom and drinking \$7 pints of beer they can't afford. And yet, people of your generation are often saying, "What happened to conceptual art?"

that capitalism, in its embrace of do-it-yourself or freelancing, instrumentalizes subjectivity and individualism.

NP: I remember the essay describing a kind of impoverishment of the very hard working, motivated, and underpaid person; the new ideal. In most cases that's disturbing and a factor. I understand broadly the necessity of critique and that the whole history of labor, labor laws, and unions sort of hold that criticism up. A natural casualty of socio-political assessment is the exception, in other words, the possibility of an individual's impact.

CKH: Yes, critiques of capitalism often lack confidence in humanity to be humane. When in fact even in the most ridged of systems—penal colonies or the military—moments of humanity disrupt. Also, the way you're looking at perception—in terms of subtlety—contours slowness more complex than the fastest of computers. I've noticed a lot of young, abstract painting not only is fast and looks fast, but also pleases in a quick way. It's this provisionality that attracts many, but that to me lacks complexity and difficulty.

26-year-olds who just graduated from Pratt or SVA might be working three jobs to pay their rent. That doesn't necessarily leave much time to think about pragmatics. And if they are fortunate enough to make some cash from their art or get some hype or press, can you blame them for feeling validated to some degree?

CKH: The only thing that catches my mind in a negative way is that it's often still about you finding your voice.

KJV: Yes. But I am okay with that. I'm okay with it because I think that, again, that's what making art of any kind is really about. It perhaps reverses your generation's approach. I feel like we all need to ask: How do I understand the global scene, in order to understand myself? How do I understand myself so that I can maybe try to understand everybody else? And if I can't understand myself well enough to be critical of myself, how can I understand anybody else or anything else very well? From having a conversation with you or reading *Al Jazeera*, I learn about myself. If I don't have anything solid in terms of my own values, if I can't find my own

NP: Maybe that's the distance you mentioned when you brought up irony or self-consciousness.

CKH: Exactly.

NP: Although self-consciousness is different from self-reflection, and also different from self-entitlement—which has nothing to do with intimacy. When I say the word intimate I think of a mother and her child, this sort of care. The problem with entitlement is that it is selfish rather than self-conscious.

CKH: Which is why I miss self-consciousness so much. In place of self-consciousness is selfishness.

NP: Right, but then again self-conscious may not be generous, or even other-aware.

CKH: Well, a third term that is neither self-conscious nor selfish could be generous, or perhaps conscientious. My concern is that a lack of explicated politics enables an artist to do what he or she wants without a guidepost that is external to one's own desires, or wants, or what gratifies you. Without something external, whether an ideology, or a political or

voice, how can I even contribute anything worthwhile at all?

Postscript: Varadi lives in Los Angeles as of October 2013.

socially transformative agenda, work becomes deeply personal, and possibly self-indulgent.

NP: That's a danger. And it has to do with not knowing how to spend your time. Yet it presumes that politics is the only possibility for external engagement, and that guideposts have to be visible to those whom the post is not for. There is a reason, even back in the early 18th century, the poet Edward Young asked, "Born original, how comes it to pass that we die copies?" It's worth asking every day, rather than fall into the hole of anonymous, impotent individualism, in lieu of the longer road towards an actual impact as an individual.