Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

Mary Weatherford by Hamza Walker

Athena, 2018, Flashe and neon on linen, 117 × 104 inches. Photos by Fredrik Nilsen studio. Images courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery.

Walker, Hamza, "Mary Weatherford," *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

Curator Hamza Walker visited Mary Weatherford's Los Angeles studio this past April to record the following conversation.

HAMZA WALKER Do you see yourself participating in a painterly tradition that is particularly American—one that goes by the name of gestural abstraction? An American painting, does that mean something to you?

MARY WEATHERFORD Yes.

HW "Yes"—I like it. As much as you don't want to admit it. You're letting your hair down. Who was it that Edvard Munch painted? Salome. You look kind of like her right now. Let the record show.

MW The defendant always has to say it for the record.

HW Are you guilty of making American paintings?

MW That was the whole point. I'd say in 1985 or '86 I had a sit-down with myself and asked, "What's the project here?" I tried to chart a course by examining my circumstances, sort of like the Patti Smith song, "... at heart, I'm an American..." My received knowledge of art history was straight Western canon; I failed to take the pre-Columbian or Chinese art history courses, though there were great opportunities to do so. I was under the spell of the West.

So, what do Americans do? Paint big paintings. Of course, we know that there are enormous French and Italian paintings, but the history pill I swallowed is that Americans took painting off the easel, which is not true. Artists did that a long time ago, inside caves, other places, in other parts of the world.

HW Before there was an easel.

MW I was interested in what my part in the feminist project could be. I was living in New York and I was in the Whitney Program. Art that was grabbing my attention was outside of painting: Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, Martha Rosler. The work that felt important—film is included in that—was outside of the big tent, the big boardroom of paint. I decided to work in the tradition of the large American painting. In 1991, I made a painting that was six by eleven feet. It was almost done once I decided the size.

HW The scale was content, in a sense.

MW Most of the paintings from '89 are five by ten feet. The reason is that they came apart into two five-by-five foot squares, and I had enough strength to lift them by myself. I could put one on the wall on nails, holding the painting with one foot underneath and my hand on top.

HW I like your flat foot in this; what's so American in American painting? And your unquestioning answer: Scale. But tell me how you paint. One of the things I fixate on with your paintings is that you engage, at a formal level, with a particular moment, the tail end of the comet of triumphal American abstraction—gestural abstraction into Color Field painting.

MW There is a book called *The Triumph of American Painting*. Even as a teenager I knew this would be questioned. How can painting triumph? Sherrie Levine was the Trojan horse—ideas spilling out.

HW Wow, I wasn't expecting that. So you think of your engagement as—

MW —one-hundred-percent critical.

HW Meaning in quotation marks?

MW That's where it's getting slippery. Are these paintings sincere or are they paintings of paintings? They are sincere. But here's the problem, Hamza... Let's get out of the realm of painting and move over into something that we can use as a metaphor, like a novel or poetry.

HW You seem to suggest that it isn't a question of you being an heir in any direct sense to a triumphal American gestural painting. It's not as simple as that.

MW No. And I'm not that heir.

HW You inherited painting as a text, so to speak, as something that is read as much as it's seen.

MW Well put.

HW How innocent as viewers of gestural abstraction could we possibly have been? As though painting was as fresh as it was in 1948. But you inherited these paintings of the New York School in the opposite way, in quite a heavily mediated fashion.

MW We can't unknow history—we can't unknow the Vietnam War. I wasn't naively thinking, There is unfinished business in Pollock. That's not where I came from.

HW But at the same time, that would suggest casting your project as ironic.

MW But it's not.

HW Right. So basically, you were at the edge of an uncritical relationship to gestural abstraction versus a critical relationship to gestural abstraction, but yet not falling quite into postmodern irony. The words *serious* and *sincere* are very telling in terms of how we tend to read paintings.

Walker, Hamza, "Mary Weatherford," *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

MW A big influence for me was Moira Dryer. She stayed out of the big tent by painting on plywood and cutting it into shapes—messing with painting like Frank Stella by way of Nancy Graves or Ree Morten. I wanted to use feminine imagery—like flowers—and paint, to put these two things together. Over the years it morphed into collage and then that lit up with neon. It's a complicated question. I am trying to paint like I can make *Citizen Kane*.

HW I like that.

MW It's like George Eliot, who turned out to be a woman.

HW But the name George Eliot wasn't replaced by Mary Ann Evans, her actual name—even now that we know that she was a woman.

MW You picked the most difficult topic. But I guess you have to go there.

HW It was just a lead-in. (*laughter*)

Do you have a relationship to the Greenbergian narrative of Modernism?

MW Everybody does! I can't unknow my education. Of course I have a relationship to "Modernism reveals the means of its own making." There are a lot of moves I make in the paintings that are one-hundred-percent *that*. I was in the architecture department at Princeton for a while and I learned how "form follows function." Brooklyn Bridge, Meyer bridges… The most beautiful bridge is the bridge that works. My work is nothing more than a trace of my trajectory from cradle to grave.

HW As I said earlier, the tail end of that comet of American gestural abstraction is Color Field painting—

MW Let's talk about that. What is the tail end of that comet? It's mainly out of Washington, DC, right? Color Field painting is Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, influenced by Helen Frankenthaler.

HW Jules Olitski.

MW Then Gene Davis and Sam Gilliam. Is Sam further down the tail of the comet? I never saw his work in person until a few years ago, but in the far reaches of my memory I remember those draped stainy things in some *Artforum*. And they got a hook on the coat rack of my memory.

HW This is exactly what I want to talk about. I want to zero in on how you paint. You mention Sam Gilliam, the nature of abandoning the support, and the kind of narrative, reductivist logic of painting. What were those characteristics? Can you reduce painting to color and shape? What are the characteristics that are unique to painting as an art form? Sam Gilliam fits into that reductive logic and narrative. And there is another phase after—

MW I was familiar with the artists at Paula Cooper Gallery because I worked there in the 1980s. I love Alan Shields's work. He became a Shelter Island ferry captain. I have a background in craft from sewing my own clothes growing up. I made tie-dye, I made macramé, I wove, I crocheted, I dyed yarns. All of this is coming together—my Southern California craftiness and painting.

HW How concerned are you with composition?

MW It's key. To think about it: Larry Poons is and is not, and Gilliam is not and is. Howardina Pindell is not until she is interested in the composition at the very edge.

HW What's your relationship with the edges of your paintings?

MW It says everything. We forgot to add Sam Francis into the Color Field group. That's what makes it a hardcover novel. I'm not handing out leaflets. I'm like, You've got to take me seriously because I've got composition!

HW (*laughter*) You went from the hardcover to the leaflets, but there's a lot in between. Like softcover—

MW Ha. Leaflets were often more effective than hardcover.

HW With the hardcover metaphor, are you also referring to the painting as an object with a solid structure?

MW Yeah, a painting is on stretcher bars.

HW So a painting is hardcover by virtue of being on that frame?

MW Well, I'm kind of jealous of the person throwing leaflets out the window.

HW Would that be Gilliam in a way?

MW Sure. You and I can make a chart of who's throwing leaflets out the window and who's hardcover.

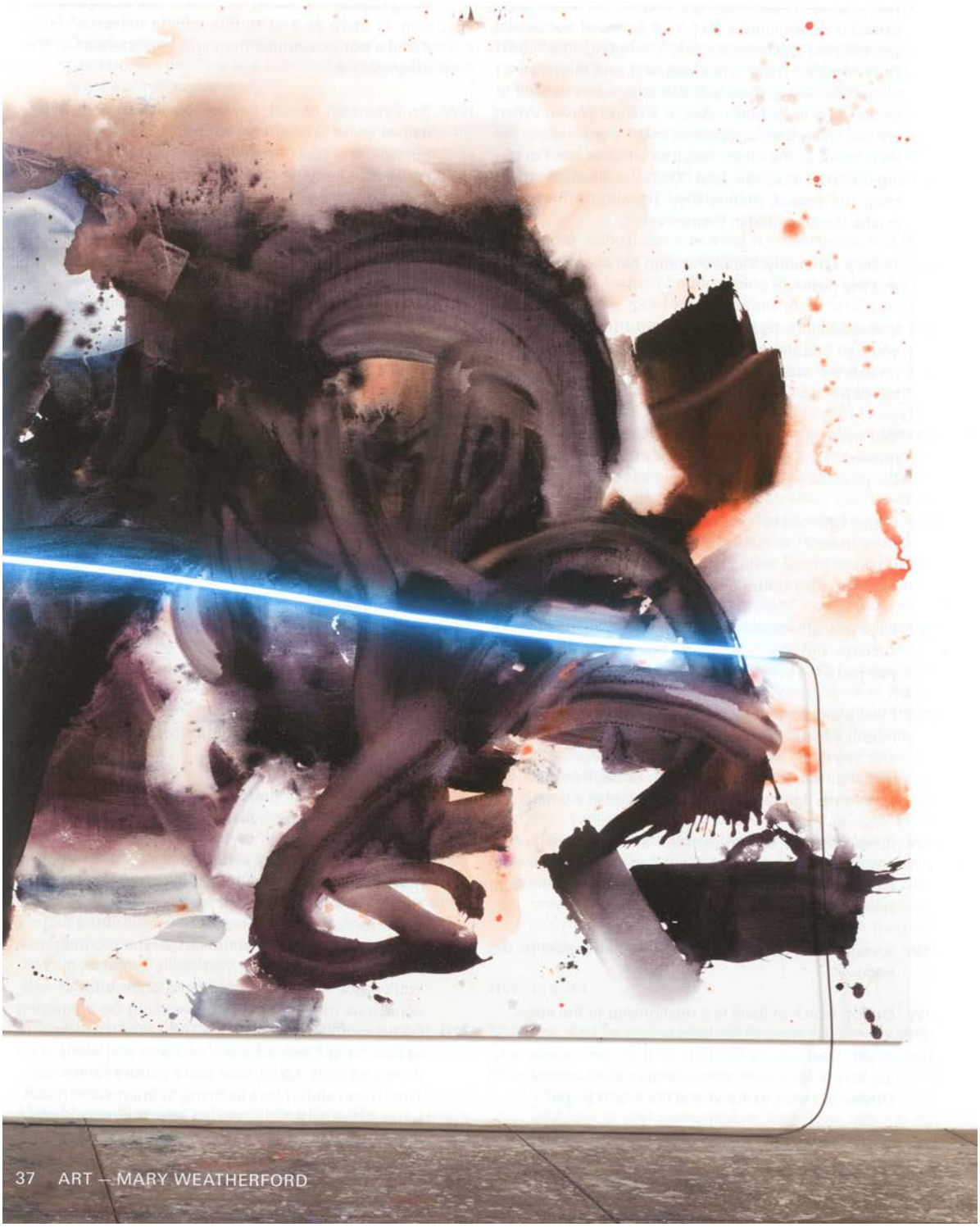
HW There seems to be a discrepancy, though, between the paint itself and the support.

MW The tension between the tissue-paper-thin paint and the substantial linen is interesting. If I deliver something that's almost not there *and* so very there, it's problematic, in a good way. A difference between my work and Color Field work is that I gesso the ground. It's a technical variant, but it's important because

Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars (Take the A Train), 2018, Flashe and neon on linen, 117 × 234 inches.

Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43



Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

in Color Field, the ground is raw fabric, so the color soaks in—the Greenbergian idea of pure color. I became less interested in what paint could do on its own and more interested in seeing the trace of will. This is where I have to bring in sports. The reason basketball is so exciting is that it's a series of successes and failures, and there's a risk in shooting, like "Look! Oh, I missed." There is learning, will, and then instinct takes over. The spectator is able to imagine himself or herself as a basketball player or a tennis player. When I'm watching Serena Williams make decisions, in the far reaches of my mind I begin to embody her. I'm trying that shot, but I fail. That "Oh!", the disappointment from the crowd, means they are also, somewhere inside, disappointed in themselves.

HW There's sympathy. There's a bond between the player and the observer.

MW In the paintings that I'm making now, in their thinness, you can see the moves and decisions. The painting reveals the means of its making. Back to Modernism, but to me it's true to the way of sports.

HW You want agency, engagement, showing all your moves. There's a player present making the painting. Do you lose paintings working that way?

MW Some. One can set up a rule and if the rule is followed, then there's no failure. But I have an internal composition meter telling me, between color and form, whether it's a failure or success.

HW I like your sports analogy. One could think of absolute success and absolute failure, but it's a great game if you pull off a victory with 98 to 94.

MW I like a close game. I make the paintings harder and harder for myself. I also experiment with the lights and one day, I saw one going off the edge and I realized that this was the next thing to do. Because why should the light be captured like a bird in a cage?

HW If we go back to composition and your tissue-thin layers, to what extent does the structure determine composition? Your paintings have a really interesting relationship to the edge.

MW Always. Everything is about the relationship to the edge.

HW Or not, which in itself is a relationship to the edge.

MW Right. I've always thought of that, philosophically, as, Where do I end? Where's the membrane of self? Where does the self end and the world begin?

HW The world as the structure that's a given. So in terms of the self, do you think of the support, the canvas, as the world into which one is cast?

MW Yes. I construct a frame and then painting is a game of Pong happening within the frame. It's also the question: Is there an end to this infinite universe? Frida Kahlo's body becomes the earth almost—part of the environment.

HW An extension of self. I want to ask you about your use of color again. It's beautiful to see your paintings before you turn the neon on, but they're not really doing anything before they're turned on. I was shocked by how much the neon light reveals the translucent nature of the paint layers. I could see through them! Do you have to hunt for the right color of light for each painting?

MW That's way harder than painting the painting.

HW So you cycle through different colors?

MW I make patterns out of paper ranging from eighteen inches to ten feet long. I have boxes of different colors of glass tubes. Then I say, "I want these lengths and shapes out of white or half sunflower yellow and half saffron yellow; these out of uncoated ultramarine or coated ultramarine." I have an inventory of colors and shapes to play with. Then I ask myself, Does this do anything for the painting? That usually takes a long time to determine. Sometimes it's instantaneous.

HW How important is positioning the lights?

MW I don't want the painting to be a ground for the light. Two things, paint and light, are coming together to create a third thing.

HW To what extent is there an improvisatory approach to making a painting?

MW Completely. Parameters are set, and the only choice I make is—and I have just a general idea—do I make this painting empty, or do I make a full painting? Sometimes, starting a full painting, the first few moves are so good that I walk away and leave it as an empty painting. Or I set out to make a yellow painting, and it turns out to be black. The magic of the picture is in the not knowing, in the desperation. Sometimes I think, My god, Mary, you really limited yourself. You've got to override this conglomeration of self-conscious moves. I could be working on a painting for hours and say to myself, "This really is a lacework of fear," and I take a bucket of water and dump it on there and think, Okay, now we're getting somewhere. Then it can shift. I love listening to improvised music. I can listen and there are people that know much more than I do.

Walker, Hamza, "Mary Weatherford," *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

In the paintings that I'm making now, in their thinness, you can see the moves and decisions. The painting reveals the means of its making. Back to Modernism, but to me it's true to the way of sports.

HW Do you think of your paintings as serial—where a painting is a painting is a painting? Where difference is born out of sameness?

MW Oh, yeah. The train yard paintings I've been working on, they are night paintings, ranging from dark deep purple to black. They are a series. There are about a dozen vertical black paintings with white lights. They are kind of depicting a train yard at night. There's the clanging of bells and whistles and sounds of the trains. There's always sound that enters when I'm thinking about a painting. To me they have sound. You can identify which painting was painted three years ago and which was painted last week, but they are all very similar.

HW I wasn't so much referring to a series per se as much as to an approach. Is there an ur-painting? Do you think, That one is so beautiful and I want to go back to that place?

MW Oh yes, I do that all the time. But it never works. You can't go back. The paintings are changing by themselves and I don't have anything to do with it. I just show up. It's both upsetting and wonderful to see the paintings change without my permission, without my willing them to do so.

HW Are your body and the gesture of action painting an ultimate parameter for you?

MW Oh sure. I think I won't be able to make these twenty years from now, but then I look at Cy Twombly and think, maybe.

HW Do you consider your paintings performative?

MW Yeah, I really like the Japanese Gutai painter, Shiraga. Think about Yves Klein as the flipside of that. He used women's bodies to make paintings. I mean, my hands and feet are in the painting. It's not like with Pollock. It's not Morris Louis, though it happens on the ground. It's not like Twombly, it's not Joan Mitchell. I paint with bare feet, I walk about in the paintings, but I try to remove the footprint. If it's there, it's an accident. I don't want to be coy in that way.

HW The performative seems subordinate to the result. Not that there's a split. At the end the painting is the painting. The performative nature is implicit.

MW My paintings are without instructions, it's just: Here's the paint!

HW Part of the effect of the paintings is freedom or liberation. It's an area that becomes a field of activity and that area is simply as big as it needs to be.

Let's shift topics. Until recently, I had no idea you played music. You really dropped a bomb on me when you revealed that you studied guitar with Dave Van Ronk. Can you talk about your relationship to roots music and folk and blues?

MW I took piano lessons as a kid in Los Angeles, and then I got a little red guitar and started playing it when I was young. I learned fingerpicking in junior high. Around '96 in New York I was speaking with Dan Zanes, who played with the Del Fuegos and then became Dan Zanes who plays for kids. He suggested I go to his guitar teacher. I left a voice message and a few weeks later I get a phone call, and there's a gravelly voice on the other end: "This is Dave Van Ronk and I have time for lessons." So I went to his apartment and played something for him. I took lessons once a week for three years and slowly learned his repertoire.

Van Ronk sang in a barbershop quartet in the Bronx when he was young. That's why he was such a brilliant arranger. Through Van Ronk I learned the history of the roots of jazz. What Dave taught me was: Guitar is not important; it's the human voice that's important. So you have to learn to sing. I could never do that. Somehow my voice and my guitar playing could never come together, maybe because I haven't practiced enough. I memorized a lot of songs and I would sing them poorly. But he would never let me get away with just playing. I had to sing and play. Once I came to him and said, "I started writing this song..." and he said, "No! There are too many songs in the world already." That was his thing. He maybe wrote a handful of pieces in his whole career. Everything else was traditional or he brought it along in adaptation. He arranged "House of the Rising Sun," taught it to Bob Dylan. Then Dylan put "House of the Rising Sun" on his first album without asking Dave, and so Dave was always mad about that. I think Van Ronk taught me more about art and how to be an artist than any instructor I ever had.

HW In spirit.

MW Yes. And he encouraged me in many ways in my painting. I think my painting got better while studying with Dave and just seeing what it looked like to be a real artist. It might have influenced my ideas about form and format and composition. Van Ronk used to tell this story about how they were driving the Reverend

Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

40 Studio view of “Train Yard” series, 2016-2019, each painting Flashe and neon on linen, 112 × 99 inches.

Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

Walker, Hamza, “Mary Weatherford,” *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

Gary Davis around. Once they drove from Boston and Davis was in the back seat playing "Candy Man," which has this picking pattern with a funny transition between two different chords. Davis was playing "Candy Man" over and over and over and Dave said, "You can't really turn around and tell Gary Davis to stop." But then they realized he was asleep. He was playing in his sleep, according to this story. The point being: when you learn something perfectly, you have freedom, you can play in your sleep.

HW I like how this music is interwoven with the quotidian as a source of inspiration—for the aboutness of your paintings.

MW "Jumped in the river, and I started to drown, thought about my baby and I turned around." Like that?

HW There we have it. Recently having done, with Josh Kuhn, a series of artist interviews built around the game show Name that Tune—artists who have a specific relationship to music, not artists whose work is about music per se—you would have not come to my mind.

MW I don't wear it on my sleeve.

HW Most people don't know how much of a blues gal you are.

MW Well, I don't know as much about Delta Blues as I think I should.

HW But you've played it, on guitar! And having been taught by one of the folk music revival legends, it's a different kind of knowing. Can you play one of your favorite songs?

MW I can only play one that I know. I haven't practiced, but let's see. (*picks up guitar, tuning it*)

HW (*shouts*) Green Green Rocky Road! I'm the belligerent audience member. (*sings along to her guitar playing*) I was joking asking for that song. I'm blown away that you can actually do it!

(*singing together*)

MW I need to practice. My fingers are soft again. I'm not a natural musician and I don't expect myself to be. Here's my book of what Dave taught me. Lessons would last an hour if I had practiced, or fifteen minutes if I hadn't practiced. The price was $30 until he apologetically raised it to $35. I was being with greatness for $35 a week. Dave would sit on the couch with a novel and his guitar next to him. He would drink iced coffee with a straw and smoke, and he had a pot of something cooking on the stove. That was his world. He was one of the most well-read people I've met.

42 *The Ocean Is in the Sky*, 1994, starfish, Flashe, molding, and paste on jute, 39 × 54 inches.

Walker, Hamza, "Mary Weatherford," *BOMB*, Summer 2019, pp. cover, 33-43

The blues, the kind of music where there's narrative, a story, and a form to it, a chorus, let's say... Going to the Whitney Program and thinking about art, there was a trajectory into the unknown of more advanced thought. Studying with Van Ronk, there's no advancement. There's a betterment of beauty and artistry and depth of poetry. It's not critical.

HW Playing music was more than a hobby for you. It held lessons for ways of being. It was a counterpoint to your studies at the Whitney.

MW It humanized my art—the reverence for storytelling and nuance, the human voice and improvisation. It was right around when I was making the starfish paintings and was working in my apartment. I almost had the relationship to my artwork that Van Ronk had to his guitar—I decided the best time to paint was in my pajamas. I had a job, but I wanted to be as close to dreaming as I could, so I wanted to work in my apartment. Learning these songs brought the poetry into my work.

HW And accessibility and openness. The blues as a rudimentary form—

MW Here's a good example. I just got back from San Francisco where I made four prints at Crown Point Press. They are called *The Bather*, *The Frog*, *The Robot*, and *The Walls of Dis*. If you can follow this line of thinking, it's part of my feminist project. When I looked at the print, I said, "I see a frog." In art school, when someone comes to your studio and says, "I see a frog," you reply, "Oh, no, no, this is not a frog, this is abstraction." I considered "seeing something" amateurish. Now, I think, the older one gets, one can say, it looks like a frog, or a robot, or a bather. So that naming—like, "That cloud looks like a bunny rabbit!"—that's child's play. But then you play "Green, Green Rocky Road," and that's a child's clapping song. It was a poet who brought it to Van Ronk.

HW It seems like part of Modernism in terms of getting at the fundamental basis of color and shape, but does that have a relationship to teaching, children, and nursery rhymes because of its fundamental nature?

MW Maybe I'm overemphasizing the childlike stuff. The blues is the blues. There's that great Angela Davis anthology of the lyrics of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and Lady Day. It's all their lyrics and Davis writes about them. I have a lot of deference for these songwriters. With these songs, I wonder, Is it autobiography, is it theater? I guess painting for me is like writing songs. I think of them musically, some of the big ones are quite orchestral. So there is a relationship to music. I don't want to make it too strong, it's just there.

HW You're close enough to hitting the nail on the head for me.

MW But where is the nail, you know? It has something to do with being mature enough, and that's such an icky word, but being kind of old enough to say, "Look, it's a frog." And then let's talk about frogs and robots, and aliens. I've made paintings of alienation before. And the *Walls of Dis* is from Dante, by way of Smithson.

HW Which bears the question of your relationship to irony. I never think of you as ironic.

MW Perhaps there was a time when people thought I was.

HW To what extent did you indulge to think you were ironic?

MW In an interview with Alex Israel, we talk about my candy-colored cave paintings. We talk about Laguna Beach and seaside kitsch paintings. I don't know how this all ties together. Can it all be in there, in a kind of long tragedy of life? I mean the whole... at a certain age... I'm on the other side of the mountain, on the slide to the grave. It's been great.

HW We're not there yet, sister! (*laughter*)

MW I have one foot in the grave and I paint like I do. I learned a lot of stuff from the blues. Do you know what the bearing ground is? It's the burying ground. I always thought it was packed soil. I think that's what people see in the paintings. I mean, isn't that the sublime?

HW Right. I think it's a beautiful word to use because scale is very important.

MW It's like Van Ronk's version of "Hang Me," right?

Hang me, oh hang me
I'll be dead and gone
Hang me, oh hang me
I'll be dead and gone
Wouldn't mind the hanging
But the layin' in the grave so long, poor boy
I been all around this world

I don't want to put too fine a point on it, but it's there.

HW It's more in the *how* he's singing it than the what he's singing.

MW That's it. It's about *how* the painting is painted. I try to move it beyond words.