Peipon, Corrina, “Jonas Wood & Corrina Peipon in conversation,” *New Plants: Los Angeles*, Los Angeles: Anton Kern and Jonas Wood, 2010, pp. 6-7

Jonas Wood & Corrina Peipon in conversation

Jonas Wood and I met on January 13, 2010 at his studio in Culver City, California for a wide-ranging discussion about his paintings. Specifically, we discussed the roots of his most recent body of work, loosely titled New Plants. A selection of paintings, collages, and drawings from the series are collected in this volume. Images of some of the works mentioned in this excerpt from our conversation can be found on page 40.

- Corrina Peipon, Curatorial Associate, Hammer Museum

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CP: How did you move from working in the traditional genres of portraiture, landscape, and still life to the paintings you are informally calling New Plants?

JW: In 2002, I was making still lifes with plants as a means to start painting from life. *Group Portrait* [index 1] from 2003 is a large still life with ten potted plants. Before I made this painting, I made individual drawings of plants with crayons and colored pencils, like little portraits of plants. I don't know the best way to describe going from a plant to a shape that represents a leaf, but I was already making generalized shapes from what I was finding in nature. I was seeing the shapes of the leaves, using some of the colors, and even similar compositions and reducing them to more abstract forms. It's easy to see some of the newer plants in the older plants because I've been simplifying little moments that were happening in nature, and these moments have become more and more simplified.

CP: It seems like some of the shapes that arise in New Plants occur in some of the collaborative works you made with Mark Grotjahn. Do you see the works from this collaboration relating to these new paintings?

JW: The collaboration is key, but there were things already happening in certain paintings where the plant had moved pretty far away from its original reality. Before we started making collaborative work, I appropriated Grotjahn's grandfather's drawing into a painting [index 5]. It was making sense with what I was doing, so I appropriated it. The whole painting was made out of bits and pieces of old drawings that I cut out and put together, and this drawing inside the painting is a copy of Grotjahn's grandfather's drawing. What's important about this is that it is so similar to the first forms that ended up in these New Plants paintings. Mark and I were just giving each other stuff to work on—to build upon—be it something that I painted or an image he gave me that I would work over. Mark paints on reproductions of his grandfather's drawings of plants as well. He saw one of my plants in the studio and asked me to make some for him to paint on. I made those, and in exchange, he gave me a bunch of his grandfather's drawings. We had really beautiful large-scale prints made of one of his grandfather's drawings of an orchid. I added basketballs in the place of the blooms on top of these orchid reproductions [index 3]. This leaf motif in those collaborative works was repeated many times, so that was a big carryover.

CP: Both of your grandfathers were artists. Is that something you connect on as painters and as friends?

JW: We both had really artistic grandfathers but it was not even their profession; they were both doctors. My grandfather didn't start making art until he was in his late fifties or early sixties. My grandmother was also an excellent painter. I never really noticed until long after she passed away when my grandfather had a flood. It was a couple of years before he passed away, and all of my grandmother's paintings got soaked in storage. I had only ever seen a couple, and when I pulled them out, I thought they were amazing. That influenced me later. I grew up with a couple of her paintings. She made this amazing painting of what looks like a really big sort of circular whale.

CP: A manatee? You have a painting of a manatee hanging in one of your paintings of an interior scene.

JW: I grew up with that manatee painting in my house, and then eventually when I started to take photographs of my parent's house and make collages out of them as the basis for paintings and drawings, I started to incorporate my grandmother's paintings into my work.

CP: Did you feel like that was a way to bring to life these paintings that hadn't been seen by many people, even you?

JW: Yeah, I think so. That wasn't the conscious goal, but it's been amazing to re-paint works by both of my grandparents. I made this portrait of my grandfather painting in a studio that he never had. I hung all of my favorite paintings of his in the background of a collage and basically repainted a bunch of his paintings as a backdrop for a portrait of him. When I started making these New Plants, my friend Brian told me that it looked like I was painting the paintings that are in the backgrounds of my portraits and interior scenes. I was removing them from a painting and making them independent.

CP: By enlarging the paintings found within your interior scenes, you literally reinvest the image with detail. Instead of representing something in a background with just a few brushstrokes as you would have to do in a big scene painting, you give it another kind of attention entirely by making it the exclusive subject, a process which requires hundreds or thousands of brushstrokes. There are multiple re-contextualizations that occur in the process that bring to mind questions about how images are constructed, how much information we need in order to read something as a recognizable image, and how we make meaning from this information. But your work also has so much to do with your personal sense of the past, your upbringing, your parents' home, and how to construct your own memories through images.

JW: It's like making new memories. I wrote that on a drawing one time because I was trying to write an artist's statement or something. I was trying to describe how I felt, to honestly describe what I'm doing. I feel like I'm constantly making up new memories. It's my memory, but it also might be your memory of my work.

CP: I get the sense that in general you're making these new memories by making these images as a kind of revisionist history. But then you seem to get really into the details within a given "new memory," all of which could become subject matter for more paintings into infinity.

JW: I'm devouring my own subject matter...

CP: Right! *Untitled (Background Drawing)* (2009) [index 8] is

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a great example of the idea of bringing something out from the background to use as new subject matter, and it also touches on something I'm trying to get at about representation. One of the things that I like about that painting is that it is an abstract painting of a face and a horse while simultaneously being a photorealistic painting of a drawing made by your sister when she was a child that occurs in the background of *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Green Hat)* (2009).

JW: But it must also be able to stand on its own when removed from the larger context of being an image hanging in the background of a painting. It becomes its own object, so then it must fend for itself. I made *Untitled (Background Painting)* at the same time I was making these New Plants. It contains repetition of the similar shapes and colors but then appears as if it's been shaken up, like the pieces of one of these plants fell and landed in this other arrangement. It doesn't have any continuity with what you're actually seeing. It's just flatness with shapes stuck on it, which is very similar to the new plants I've done. The new plants have an obvious formal backbone, a literal solid line providing structure to center the compositions. But this painting has a different backbone because of my personal history with the image.

CP: But unless a viewer is equipped with the story, she is asked to see the shapes and colors for what they are and to have some kind of experience with these bits of visual information.

JW: One could say that all of my paintings are made of circles, squares, and triangles. These New Plants are refined, simplified forms of just shape and color with only a touch of representation. To me, shape and color dominate in terms of how things are being put together. In the collaborative works, I don't think I was conscious of making the plants fractured and geometric, but when I removed the basketballs, I was just dealing with the shapes of the leaves. Then there were these two specific images that I had in my show in Tokyo, two specific untitled pieces that I called "Calder Plants" [index 6,7]. I remember being in Japan and thinking to myself—I even sent myself an email—"I think I have to look at Calder." Even the colors in these two paintings were reminding me of Calder. These were also precursors to these New Plants paintings.

CP: What happened once you came home and looked at Calder?

JW: I took some of the sculptures that I saw in books and tried to make them match this plant aesthetic that I was building. It sort of exploded from there. I started with the paintings that have the big red dots on the side [index 9]. I made those first, and the one that has the three primary colors that hang down [index 10]—that one is based on a collage I made from images of two Calder sculptures that I just stuck in the copy machine, cut up, and then taped back together. I drew from that, and then made the paintings from the drawings.

CP: Have you ever done anything linked so directly to another artist's work before? Do you see this process as similar to working with Mark's grandfather's drawings where you are altering preexisting the images?

JW: I don't even think about it sometimes, but I do appropriate things a lot. I use basketball cards and other images from sports that I find. Some of the plant paintings I've made were appropriated from old black and white plant books that I cut out [index 2]. I even think the basketballs relate to this. I cut all these basketballs out of one NBA book and reproduced them as drawings and paintings in isolation [index 4]. This is different because I wasn't starting out with Calder in mind.

CP: You were already working in a direction that brought this other artist to mind to the degree that you wanted to research his shapes and palettes and compositions and even bring those elements into your paintings more intentionally.

JW: There are some images where I'm specifically taking the book and drawing from it. I mean, a little kid could re-draw a Calder sculpture. It's like I took Calder's bunch of stick lines and some balls or some leaf shapes and added some angles and then sort of straightened it all up to represent a plant. Stuff that I was already doing was making me think of Calder and was already pushing in a certain direction. Adding Calder to it more intentionally just felt right.

CP: I think it's interesting that your discovery of Calder was so powerful. While his work is decidedly sculpture existing in three dimensions, it has a tremendous flatness to it. In reproduction, it often doesn't even look like it has much depth. Sometimes it's almost like he's using the sizes and scales of the shapes to trick us into thinking we're looking at a drawing.

JW: It always reads flat, especially if it's lit in a certain way.

CP: One of the techniques that you use in portraying your subjects is a very similar kind of flatness. I think the phrase you used in conversation with me one time was “denial of perspective” to describe how you bring things into the front of the picture plane.

JW: When I was in school, I always tried to justify why I was making things flat. I would get a lot of pressure to depict space and form in a certain way. I do use perspective. I'm constantly using it. It's just that I'm also denying it. Sometimes, I'm just like: Fuck you. There is no space. This is just paint on a canvas.

CP: But in these geometric shapes you are painting, these basic shapes and colors can tell us so much. It's possible to see these works as plants or as sculptures on plinths or to just get into them being shapes and colors.

JW: I feel like I'm presenting these forms in the same way that I would represent something like a pot on a table with a plant in it, and that's what I feel I'm holding on to.

CP: The table's gone though... The forms just float on these picture planes.

JW: Exactly. The table is gone and the floor plane is completely erased. I think it was a reaction to seeing or re-seeing the Calder work. Calder would cut a shape out of metal, paint it bright yellow, attach it to a long stick, and hang it from the ceiling. These new plant paintings are exploring shape and repetition in that same way—through suspension in space.

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