

A conversation with Michael Meehan, NYSS MFA '05

Long Island City, Queens

December 6, 2014

Geoffrey Stein: Thanks for talking to me Michael. Can you tell me a bit about your background?



Photo G. Stein

### **Background**

Michael Meehan: I've always painted. I've drawn ever since I was a kid. I went to college and got a BFA in painting from Cornell. Then I worked in New York City for a year at Sotheby's restoring furniture, before I went to the Sotheby's Works of Art Course in London.

GS: Was that the Sotheby's business of art course?

MM: No, It was not a business course. It was an art history course for fine and decorative arts which taught you to identify and catalog works of art. We studied European paintings, sculpture, furniture, silver and ceramics. After the course, potentially you could work in an expert department and identify and catalog things. The course was eight months. Afterwards, I came back to New York. I worked for an art dealer as a preparator for a year before I moved to San Francisco, California, where I started working in graphic design.

GS: Were you painting when you were in New York?

MM: Yes.

GS: Were you painting when you were in London?

MM: No, there was too much class work. I basically went to class, rowed in the evenings, did homework and traveled when I could.

GS: What did you do after you finished the course in London?

MM: I moved to San Francisco. I was painting and working as a graphic designer and print production artist. I was working full time and painting in my free time.

GS: What were you painting?

MM: I was painting a lot of landscapes from observation and memory

GS: How long were you in San Francisco?

MM: I was there eight and a half years doing graphic design and painting at nights and weekends. Then I came back to New York. I freelanced in graphic design and print production, and painted around that. I had always wanted to do a drawing marathon at the Studio School and I did a marathon as soon as I moved back to New York.



*Asa*, 44 x 66 inches, oil on linen. Photo Michael Meehan.

### **Studio School**

GS: What year was that?

MM: I did a summer marathon in 2002. I was hooked and went full time from 2002-05

GS: How did you hear about the New York Studio School and the drawing marathon?

MM: I heard about it from friends. And I felt like I had to get back to school.

GS: Do you think there's something in your background that influences the kind of paintings you make.

MM: I've always been drawn to what I see. I've always been drawn to the landscape and the

expansive spaces of the landscape. In eighth grade I used to go to the Met to look at the Hudson River school paintings and I think the expansiveness of those paintings influenced me. Also I spent a lot of time with my family on Long Island. While living in California, the expansive space of the west had an influence on me.

I always drew. I was drawing all the time. I drew everything. When I was in grade school I used to copy cartoons out of the New Yorker and draw sailboats from magazines or imagination. In high school I started getting into drawing whatever was around me.

GS: Do you remember a time you weren't drawing or painting?

MM: I was always drawing. I always was. I started to learn how to paint the summer between my junior and senior year of high school. I spent part of the summer out in Southampton, NY, going out and painting the landscape with a painter named Casimir Rutkowski .

GS: Were you an art major at Cornell?

MM: Yes, I got a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting.

GS: And when you came to the Studio School in 2002, there was only a certificate program?

MM: Yes, there was just the certificate program. While I was at the Studio School they started the MFA program.

GS: Were you originally interested in getting an MFA when you started at the Studio School?

MM: I originally came to the Studio School for the drawing marathon with Graham. The issues the marathon brought up and the philosophy of the school got me hooked. I felt that to be the best painter I could be, I had to go to the Studio School full time in the three year certificate program. The MFA was an added bonus.

GS: And you were asked to participate?

MM: Yes. I thought it would be great to get a Masters for teaching, and I wanted to take advantage of my time at school so the more work and challenge the better.

GS: Who did you study with at the Studio School?

MM: Graham Nickson, Rosemarie Beck, Ruth Miller, Joe Santore, Stanley Lewis, Norm Turner.

GS: Did you paint with Graham?

MM: Yes, I painted with Graham for three years. Rosemarie and Norman taught drawing, my first year. Then Ruth Miller taught drawing with Ron Milewicz the following two years. Stanley Lewis was teaching drawing the last year I was there. I had Joe Santore come for critiques. I had been part of Joe's summer drawing marathon and his summer figure painting atelier. I had critiques with John Dubrow and Jake Berthot. I also had Carol Robb, as an advisor for my last year of the MFA. Karen Wilkin and Carter Ratcliff taught art history.

GS: You graduated from the Studio School in 2005. When did you go to Sweden?

MM: August 2012. Until then I was painting in New York. I spent my first full year in Sweden in 2012. I came back to New York for the winter of 2013 and went back to Sweden before returning to New York in summer of 2014.

GS: Have you taught at the Studio School?

MM: Yes. In 2005 I was a teaching assistant on Governor's Island and then in 2007 or 2008 I started teaching the Saturday drawing class. One summer I helped Joe Santore teach his figurative painting class. I also helped Graham with a drawing marathon.

GS: Did you want to teach when you started the MFA?

MM: It was in the back of my mind.

GS: Do you like teaching?

MM: I do like it. As opposed to working as a print production artist or graphic designer. Teaching keeps you thinking about painting and drawing issues. Keeps you more in the painting head space, and it's what I'm most passionate about. It keeps you on your toes, is interesting and rewarding.

GS: And now you're showing and selling paintings.

MM: Since 2008 I have had a private dealer who takes my paintings on consignment. And he's been selling them. I've been in some group shows. I am also going to have a solo show at Geary Contemporary in New York City, and they represent me.

### **Studio Practice**

GS: Could you talk a little about the work you're currently making?

MM: I work from life, from what I see. Or I take the drawings and paintings I've done from life and use them for the source material for a painting, like the painting over there [*Buttermilk Channel*].



*Buttermilk Channel*, 76 x 72 inches, oil on linen. Photo Michael Meehan.

I had all these paintings and drawings from working on Governor's island. And I had this memory of seeing this lone dog under the tree where I painted. Also I wanted to get the figure back into my work. So I put up a bunch of work from Governor's Island and started drawing to search for an image. I then started the painting. It's gone through various stages and changes. There was a dog and a tree and then the figure. Eventually the dog and tree went away. The sky went from blue to black to its present color. I like the idea of making paintings from something I've seen. When I saw all those containers and cranes in Red Hook across Buttermilk Channel from Governor's Island I knew right away 'I gotta paint those'. They

reminded me of Star Wars creatures. It was also just a gut reaction, just a strong desire to work from them from direct observation. I was responding to the rhythm of the containers on the dock, the buildings, cranes, the large expanse of sky. The space and forms. The light, the water. I like the expansive feeling of space in my paintings. I think that comes from when I was a kid looking at Hudson River School paintings, also my time out West, and surfing and just generally being outdoors. I don't always know what I'm going to paint. It depends. When I first came into this studio, I was not coming here to paint the urban cityscape, but when I walked in and I saw the huge window and all this sky, the industrial buildings, ramps for the bridge, I couldn't not do it.'



*Long Island City III*, 37 x 55 inches, oil on linen. Photo Michael Meehan.

GS: Long Island City must be different than being in Sweden.

MM: Well in Sweden, there's less daylight in the winter. But it's very beautiful there. The landscape and light were spectacular. And there were some nice views out my studio

window. I did some drawings and paintings.



*Liljeholmen Winter*, 15x15 inches, oil on linen. Photo Michael Meehan.

MM: I also like painting still lifes. With them I'm after a sort of visual poetry, where they take on the feeling of other things. When I painted salmon steaks it also felt like a landscape, a mesa out west.

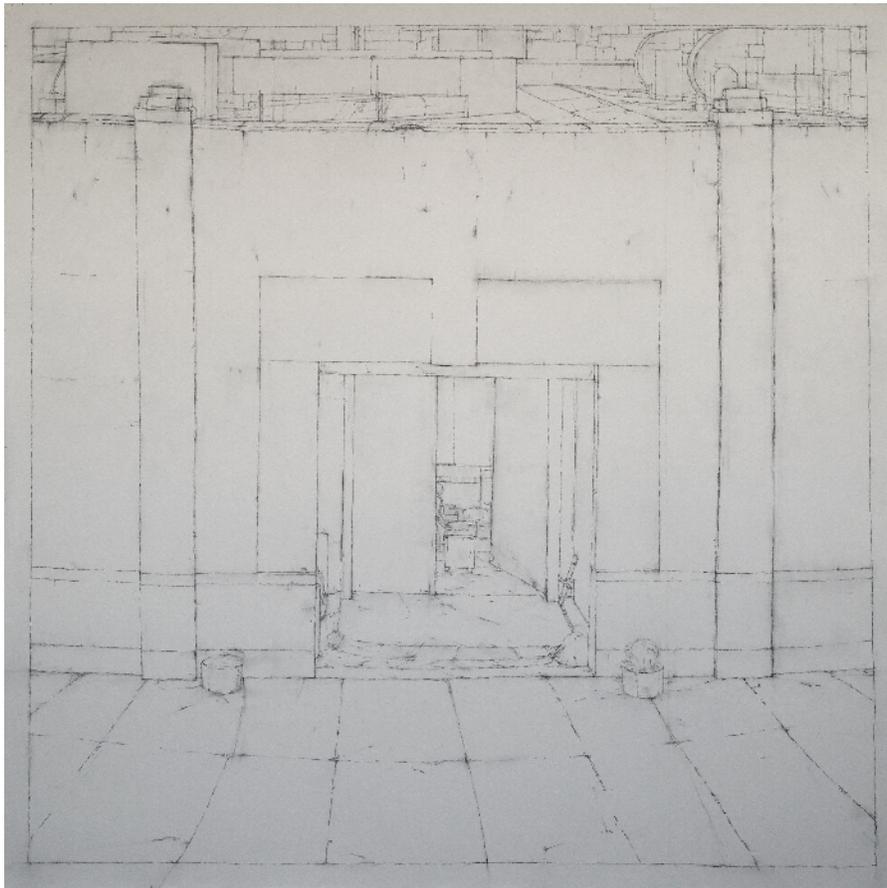


*Peeled Orange*, 5 x 8 inches, oil on linen on panel. Photo Michael Meehan.

MM: The tangerine had an anthropomorphic quality. And just the beautiful quality of the tangerines, the color and the shapes.

GS: They are very sensitively painted. You have a very delicate touch and great color sense.

MM: With *STAGE X*, I drew it sight size first and I was looking at it when I thought it could be interesting to paint it on a larger scale. So I tried it. I did two large drawings. Drawing for me is a way to find the image. It's really immediate. It's just making marks about your experience of looking. Drawing can be reduced to just mark about form and space, no tone. You don't have to think about color, value and temperature. I'm trying to find structure and imagery in the space and form when I draw.



*STAGE X*, 75 x 75 inches, graphite on paper. Photo Michael Meehan.

GS: Do you ever do tonal drawings?

MM: I do tonal drawings to study the light and tonal structure. Most of my drawings are

without tone just marks on the paper finding the structure, the image.

GS: Is drawing mainly about structure for you?



*Asa*, 44 x 66 inches, charcoal on paper. Photo Michael Meehan.

MM: I think in the beginning it's about structure, the rectangle and finding the image. I just want to locate things and find the forms and the space, the relationships. Drawing is the most immediate way for me to record my visual experience.

GS: Do you ever draw with ink and brushes?

MM: Yes I draw with ink and brushes.

GS: Tell us about your studio routine.

MM: I come to my studio between 8 and 9 in the morning. I always keep the same hours. Come in and paint, draw and not leave until at least 6 or 7

GS: Do you draw to warm up?

MM: No I usually have a few things that I'm working on and depending on the light and what time of day it is, what the weather is outside ... because if I am painting out the window, I have a painting for the morning, a painting for the afternoon, a painting for a gray day, one for a sunny day and then I have some things where people are posing for me and they show up. It just depends. If I get stuck on something sometimes I'll turn around and try to do something else. Usually I try to stay with the same three or four pieces I'm working on at the same time. When I first got back from Stockholm, I was working on some small paintings out the window. I got stuck and did a couple still lifes before I went back to painting out the window. Then I decided to try these bigger drawings of the same views. I had a model in for a week, and did a decent 40 x 50 inch drawing of her in the studio. And then I went back to the paintings. I always just try to come in and work from 9 am to 7 pm.



Photo G. Stein

GS: Do you have a computer in the studio?

MM: No.

GS: Has your studio routine changed since the Studio School?

MM: No it really hasn't. When I first got out of college I was working doing graphic design. I would have to be there in some office. I would try to find big blocks of time to just paint. A lot of times I worked full time for months and then had a few months off. I try to keep the same hours when I can. So it becomes a habit. Just come in and put in the hours, if I come here and it goes bad, it goes bad, that's what it is. You just put in the hours and work.

GS: What do you do when it goes bad?

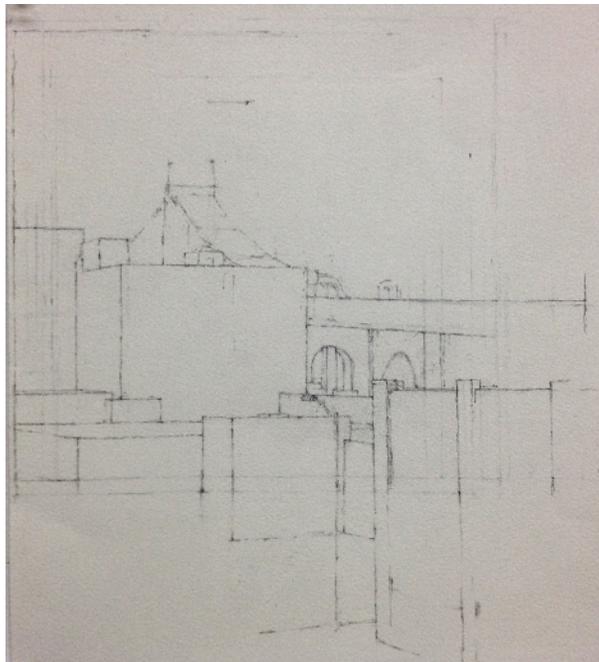
MM: Some times I take a walk. Sometimes I start something else. Usually I just keep going. I usually have several paintings of the same subject matter going. If one starts to wipe out I'll go work on another version, or pick up something different. I just keep things moving, keep working.

GS: What motivates you in your studio practice?

MM: I think everything for me is driven by what I see. Ever since I was a kid, what I saw was what made me want to draw. Whether it was from my memory of what I saw or directly from observation. I remember as a kid trying to draw things from memory. When I was in college, and in California I did a lot of paintings from memory. Now I'm working from perception. This drawing of the doorway and the rooftop of Silver Cup Studio, it came about by chance. It was part of a bigger painting that I did when I was first in here and I had this big long painting of the whole street, the building and the bridge. But I was never really happy with the painting. When I pulled it out of the rack and looked at it again after I got back from Stockholm, I realized the only thing I liked in that painting is the doorway. I thought it was really interesting because it's this huge, heavy façade with these crazy shapes on the top. There was always activity going in and out of the loading bay with all this stuff and movie sets. Things were always changing and I started doing drawings of it. That gave

me the idea to do the painting. Just thinking ‘I want to paint that.’

I started this little drawing of a red building out the window, the Steinway building. When the light is good, when it’s sunny out in the afternoon, the building shadow side becomes black and the sunny side is an intense deep cadmium red. So I started doing the drawing trying to figure out the rectangle for a small painting. I just wanted to paint the color of the building and what was around it. But when I started the drawing, I noticed these other interesting things, like how the lamppost comes up and becomes part of the wall. In the beginning it was about this red building, the bridge, the light, these crazy shadows, the black and the red. Then the next thing you know, I’m finding more things in what I see. I’ll start thinking that one thing I see will be the image and then I’ll start drawing and discover something else. Drawing for me is a way of finding things. It’s the way I start.



In progress, *Steinway Building*, 12 x 10 inches, graphite on paper. Photo Michael Meehan.

GS: Did any of these issues change as a result of your studies at the Studio School?

MM: When I got to the Studio School, I started to really understand why I liked Giacometti,

why I like Cezanne. No one really talked much about those ideas of form and space in college. My interest in working from perception has pretty much stayed the same. It's always what's been at the heart of my imagery. Working from life, you start out thinking you're going to paint the whole view and then all of a sudden you're like 'Just that door would be really great.'

GS: Do any of these perceptual issues relate to the medium you use?

MM: I like to draw in charcoal and pencil. With charcoal it's so easy to smudge, rub and erase, making it easy to keep things open, change and move things around in the composition. Also charcoal sticks are clumsy, making working on details harder, forcing you to work the whole and find the structure. You can change and move things around with pencil, it's just a little more work than charcoal. The way I draw, I like to keep the forms open for a long time and then close them down. I see erasing as just another way of drawing. I don't really think about it. I don't get freaked out about corrections or mistakes, they keep the drawing interesting. With oil paint, the feel of the paint, making the mark with it, the opacity, the color, the lusciousness of the color are what I love. And I love the physicality of oil paint.



*Ice Bather – Tentative Step*, 78 x 62 inches, oil on linen. Photo Michael Meehan.

GS: Do you keep coming back to oil, pencil and charcoal?

MM: Yes, oil, pencil and charcoal. The other thing I do want to try is printmaking. I'd like to make some dry point, aquatint and etchings. I have done monotypes when I was in San Francisco. I really enjoyed it.

GS: Can you describe your studio space?

MM: It has a huge window that faces north over the Silver Cup building in Long Island City. I paint by natural light all day long until it gets dark.



Photo G. Stein

GS: Do you work after dark?

MM: I do. Sometimes I draw after dark. Sometimes I will do some paintings with the lights on, usually a still life. I'll paint them at night. But I like to do paintings during the day, with the natural light.

GS: Do you think that your experience at the Studio School informed your art practice?

MM: It's the knowledge. For me, I love to work from life or based on what I've seen. I look at paintings, and what I love about them is that all painting is abstract. If you're a painter, it is important to understand that abstraction is the language of painting. I think all those hours drawing and painting at the Studio School, dealing with form and space, all those issues and all that information from all the teachers – that knowledge is there to draw from. I use that as a spring board for my own search. I think the way to do it is just to paint and think about those issues when you're painting. When I'm painting I'm just painting and when it's going

well I just thinking about making the painting work.

GS: When you work in the studio, do you listen to music, the radio or books on tape?

MM: No. Usually it's quiet. Every once in a while I'll turn on the music when I need some energy. I love music but I have a really hard time painting with it on. After a while I get too distracted.

GS: What artists are you looking at now?

MM: Right now I'm looking at Masaccio. I was just down in D.C. and I was in the National Gallery looking at several John F. Peto still life paintings. Recently I was looking a lot at Martin Johnson Heade's painting, *The Coming Storm*, in the Met.

GS: Have the artists you are looking at changed since the Studio School?

MM: Sure. I'm always open to seeing something new. I try to make time to catch as many shows as possible.

I go back and forth depending on what I'm working on and thinking about. Sometimes I go to the Met and look at Indian miniatures and the next time a Fayum portrait or a Courbet. I'm still looking at Giotto, Piero, and Masaccio. I've always loved Giacometti. I'm totally crazy about Giacometti's drawings.

GS: Have you seen the show at the Studio School?

MM: Yes, it was beautiful. And then I guess Cezanne and Morandi, at times. I also look at Uglow, Freud, Auerbach. I've seen some Gwen John paintings that I really like. There was a Gwen John in the Met but they don't have it up anymore. I also like Matisse, Bonnard, Poussin, Deibenkorn, Albert York and Guston.

I also like Turner. I like Velazquez a lot too. And Goya. I just saw this Constable at the National Gallery. They have a version of “The White Horse” but it’s rougher. Another version is in the Frick. The one at the Frick is more finished looking. But I was really drawn to the one in D.C. I thought it was amazing. I hadn’t looked at his work in a long time.

### **Conclusion**

GS: You have been very generous with your time. Do you have any advice for folks thinking of studying at the New York Studio School in the MFA program?

MM: I would try to stay for three years, because there's so much to learn about the language of painting and drawing. It's a rarity to find this sort of teaching about those issues. I think to really learn it, I couldn't see leaving after two years. I was at the Studio School for three years. The first year I was in the certificate program. If I just had the last two years, the MFA, I don't know if I would have learned as much. Having those three years working from the model, working from life with everybody else. Going to all the drawing classes. I learned so much. Being out of college and having to work, and having painted for a while and then going back to school, I knew to take advantage of all the time I had to paint. I knew once I graduated, there wasn't going to be so much time. It was going to be hard to have as much uninterrupted time for painting and drawing.



Photo G. Stein

GS: Was there something you would have liked to have as part of the Studio School MFA that was not offered?

MM: I can't think of anything.

GS: When you're not making art what other things do you do?

MM: I used to surf a lot. Now less so. I work out most days. I was a rower in college.

GS: Do you ever surf with Jim Plunkett?

MM: We went surfing once or twice, it was a blast, He's a pro.

GS: Do you skateboard with him?

MM: No I don't skateboard. That's not for me. I don't like breaking bones.

GS: Do you have any final thoughts about the Studio School MFA program?

MM: For me it was the best thing I ever did. It changed my life. For me it was a perfect fit. I was fascinated by working from perception and all the issues that come out of working from life. It was a perfect match for me. The Studio School emphasized issues that were not widely discussed in college. I don't think people talk as much about these issues these days. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot "you have to understand the past in order to make your own thing." There's a language that runs through all of painting, from Giotto onwards. A big part of painting is to think about the forms and the space, not paint things in isolation and using the abstract language of painting and drawing to come up with a compelling image.

GS: Do you have a website?

MM: [www.MichaelJMeehan.com](http://www.MichaelJMeehan.com)

GS: Thank you Michael.