

## **Darren Waterston in Conversation with Timothy Anglin Burgard Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA**

April 28, 2009

**Introduction by Cheryl Haines:** Darren Waterston has been sequestered for quite some time, working very studiously on two major exhibitions, one of which you're experiencing this evening here at the gallery. The other one, which is truly extraordinary, is "Splendid Grief" at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University. This is the culmination of two years of research into the life of Leland Stanford Jr., who was the personality that the University was founded on in his honor. We also have with us tonight Tim Burgard, who is the curator of American Art at the Fine Arts Museums here in San Francisco. Tim and Darren have, over a number of years, come to know each other very well. In fact, they've been talking about perhaps doing an exhibition together at some point. Though Tim didn't curate this current exhibition, we thought that the two of you have a wonderful ongoing conversation, and we're really looking forward to hearing it. It's a much larger group than we were anticipating; we were going to do a walk through but I think at this point we'll begin with a more formal question and answer, and after that time we can get up and walk around, and if you have any questions about individual works, I'm sure that Darren would be happy to answer.

**Timothy Anglin Burgard:** So, thank you all for coming, and thank you especially to Darren, who I know from first hand experience has been working very hard as he always does. It seems rarer and rarer these days to have artists who actually have a work ethic, and he certainly has one. We won't go into the psychology of that tonight. But I also want to, since I am here, make a plug for the Fine Arts Museums. Something we just found out from the art newspapers, which you can all be proud of as San Franciscans and Bay Area residents: the Fine Arts Museums now have the third biggest museum membership in the country, after the Metropolitan and the MOMA in New York. That's 94,000 households. Last year at the de Young Museum, not even counting the Legion of Honor, we had the fourth biggest attendance of any museum in the United States, after the Met, MOMA, and National Gallery in Washington. So, you should all be very proud because I think you are all members and you all support the museums.

It's hard to know where to begin. Darren and I both did the same thing, which was make little pieces of paper with little notes, so we'll start with those, and we'll just jump in and I thought we would ask some questions. If there is time or space, we'll walk around and you can ask Darren some questions. Ask him anything you want. I'm going to start with all of the really embarrassing questions, and then you can add on what you see fit.

I'm actually going to start with something about landscape. It's pretty clear looking at Darren's work both now and historically, as it were, him being of great age and experience now, that they are in some sense, or at least we respond to them as landscapes in one form or another, whether they're mental landscapes, or physical landscapes, or natural landscapes, or unnatural landscapes. So I wanted to ask you about that, and specifically, we think we know nature through science, through zoology and botany and

other things. We think we know it through art, sometimes, through the way that artists have focused our attention on aspects of nature, or we think, sometimes truths about nature, including photography, which has played an important role in that as well, or even images in the other room here, and Darren's own work about these issues.

And yet, I think we also know now very well in the Post-Modern era, if we didn't know it previously, that these are really essentially intellectual or aesthetic constructions. That they don't have any inherent innate truth, but that they have what we bring to them, and what we apply to them, and what we project onto them, and so forth. I was thinking this morning about this, because Darren's work so often seems to respond not only to landscape, and certainly the macrocosm of biology and other life forces, and the microcosm and perhaps celestial ones as well. And when you take as a given how a Leonardo landscape might look different from a Darren Waterston landscape or any other artist among them, take your pick, Cezanne, and yet we somehow assume that a scientific illustration for example about a microcosm or biology, is just a truth. And yet we also all know that if you look at an 18<sup>th</sup> century botanical illustration of the very same plant, and look at it now, 200 years later, they are absolutely and totally different. Those are inflected by art history and by art as well. And so they really are constructs, so I'm wondering if you can talk about that and the way which landscapes really are your own mythology rather than being something that we tend to think of nature as somehow being true, and we apply all of these values to it...

**Darren Waterston:** I always think of art, anything that has to do with perception, in particular in looking at a work of art, I feel like it's always this very unstable logic that we have to enter into and know that our perceptions are constantly shifting and that we don't live in this world of absolutes, as much as we try to grasp towards concepts and ideas both in science and in particular, belief structure that...you know, we so much want to reduce everything down to our complete in-depth understanding of something, but it is that it's constantly shifting and changing. And I find that every time I look at a painting, that I feel as if I have a complete understanding of what the artist set out to do and what the intention was, and it so often comes that you come back to it again and you realize that your perceptions are never stable, and so I play with that a lot in my own work, just the thought of, like...someone is standing in front of this 2-D space, and you're asking the viewer to enter into the space, physically and just the physiological position of standing in front of a painting, and also you're asking them to take also a metaphysical jump as well, as an out of body, in some way, in that your perceptions are going to require you to take a leap, the artist is asking you to take a leap trusting that there is some sort of logical space that you're going to enter into. And I'm always wanting to play with that kind of irrational space. That's so often what I'm trying to play with as I'm painting, I'm wanting to set up a sense of dislocation, almost. That you're sort of in an uncomfortable position of "Oh this is something that I perceive as real," and there are certain triggers that might give you some sort of representational something to kind of hook onto a little bit, and then there's this whole other kind of illogical thing in play as well. So using some of the traditions of landscape painting where, throughout this long tradition, the artist has very presumptuously been in the position to document sort of the phenomenon in some way, whether it's just the idea of light or representation of

landscape, and so much of that construct of landscape is really through painting: the invention of landscape through the pictorial space. Landscape is not anything out there in the real world; it's our own perception and it's our own human viewpoint of natural phenomenon that we reduce down and call it landscape. So, all of these things I have always been really interested in.

**Burgard:** The obvious example would be perspective. We think we know what perspective is, and then we look at Asian asymmetric perspective and it's a very different kind of world view. And then you really begin to understand that it is a construct, you know, single point or two point perspective. And in terms of the physical sort of impression, and I think you've talked about this, the degree to which people superimpose or project their own emotive associations, poetic or prosaic or whatever they might be, and I thought you phrased it in a really interesting way and, art historians have thought about this, of course, that landscape is an independent genre as opposed to the thing over Gene Ruda Vinci's shoulder in the Leonardo or some little detail in Handleman Tuscan cypress trees in the background. You talked about it in an interesting way, in that landscape couldn't exist or didn't exist until we somehow as viewers felt ourselves removed from nature. That it was no longer a primal experience of being in nature every day of our lives, perhaps depending where you were living in Medieval Europe or Asia, and certainly going back eons, and that somehow we now had adopted a perspective outside of nature. We were now a voyeuristic, outside, clinical, analytical, replication, representation, take your pick, you're an artist you're obviously playing that role, and there was this break where the sundering of that sense of being in it and now standing outside of that experience. I thought that that was a really interesting way of talking about it, and then what we then project onto it, almost like a filmic experience, or a blank screen, our own assumptions, our own associations, our own expectations, you've talked about that too.

**Waterston:** I do find that one comes to a work of art with huge expectations to have a transformative experience in some way. And often times, I think it's very common that through the construct of landscape that we are wanting to experience something outside of ourselves, something that is just by not even going out into the world or actual real nature, but when we stand in front of a painting that has some reference to a little, whether something atmospheric that has to do with sky or landmass or water or particular reflection or quality of light. I mean, we really come to it as if this is supposed to give us information, this is supposed to transform us in some way. We are wanting something that...what I think is almost something that is an alienation from it that we are waiting to find an exultation into it. Again, through representation, through art. I think we feel this alienation and we don't come to nature itself, but we come to art, we come to, not necessarily just painting but...I do think that there's a really interesting thing...we find ourselves trying to reconnect back to nature, "nature" if you will, through representation of the landscape even further removed, right? I mean, it's a strange notion that we're already feeling so detached from it, yet we come to the art to reconnect with it. And mostly it also has to do with having some other transformative experience through this lens of the work of art. And I've kind of been looking at something in the last few years about the horizon line, as far as pictorial representation and landscape representation.

And how if you look through art history, there's almost this perfect undulating wave of the horizon line that starts actually very low and when the human endeavor is feeling extraordinarily that...they've taken their rightful place in the universe, and they're very small and it's all sky. So often you'll see it in pre-renaissance paintings that the horizon is low, there is an enormous amount of sky and then, as the age of Enlightenment hits, horizon line lifts up, the sky is very thin, and all human activity is taking up so much of the pictorial space, and if you watch again it drops down, it's big open skies, it's the sublime again, it's something where the human endeavor has been sort of reduced down. It takes it all the way through abstraction. You can see from just pure sort of...from an Yves Klein solid blue painting which represents a chunk of reflective abstracted sky or whatever, and then response to that in these pure color fields to Pop Art, and we're back into the human endeavor. It's interesting to see how that keeps playing back from our own relationship with the kind of abstraction of "the other" in some way, and in our disconnection from it, and then how we go back into certain banal activity of everyday life. It's very interesting and I think about it what I'm working around this representation of light or sky or horizon line in some way.

**Burgard:** It's certainly true, as in, no one can stand outside of their time. But you also forget then, as you say, because the human will to project and to will these things is so strong, and it can be codified in a very sometimes overly intellectual way, especially when a curator is there of course. But it is true, as soon as you make a vertical mark on any surface that is considered a realm of art, a piece of paper, a canvas, even an installation for that matter...just human nature is, that vertical thing, or it relates to me as a vertical thing, it's inherently human on some level. And that's what Mondrian said on some level, "horizontal is landscape for horizon line; blue is spiritual because it's like the sky, and red is earth and that's passion" and all kinds of other things, chauvinistic or not. And so that role is there and it's especially true, and I remember you were talking about the sublime and the modern sublime as it were, the really modern sublime, the modernist sublime, I know that there were several anecdotes about Rothko who would be a good example of this type of issue where, not unlike Georgia O'Keefe getting tagged all the time with "they're so sexual, those paintings, it's all about sex" and she finally just rejected it completely, or with Picasso with African art when he finally said, "No, I don't know African art, never heard of it, never seen it." And I know people would go up to Rothko and say, "Oh Mr. Rothko," and I'm thinking this because it follows the next question too, "Your landscapes are so transcendent!" Right away they say "landscape," and secondly they're "transcendent." And I will be the first to admit, he's one of my favorite artists, and I've had that experience, you can go to the SFMOMA and have that experience right here, and I thought of them as landscapes too, with horizon line and the sky and so forth, but they're very existential, in the way you just talked about, where this all encompassing field, whether it's grey or blue or...it starts to subsume everything else, earlier on horizon lines if you want to see them that way. But anyway, he was approached at a party who actually said that to him, and he said, "Well, I would have thought they would have made you want to pray," just completely calling her up short, but also of course speaking to something about the existential element that he perceived in his landscapes and that we willfully choose not to see until he finally hits us over the head with a truly bleak black and grey landscape. You mentioned the little triggers that

can lead people down a path of thought or association, and one of the ones that occurs to me in your work is where you will often have extraordinarily illusionistic passages of paint, actually atmospheric ones would be most obvious, and then at the same time, inherently, emphatically physical applications of paint as well. So, I'm sort of curious because it seems to call forward this dichotomy that is very much about art. The sort of chemical transubstantiation that takes place between physical pigment, mud, matter, earth, minerals, whatever it is, and how it can be transformed into something by the representational or the application or spiritual and nonmaterial and so forth. If you could just talk about that phenomenon in your work and that sort of push pull and that tension between that blob of paint on the surface and these very recessive illusionistic experiences of pigment, where it's really been transformed into something else...and carries different associations.

**Waterston:** Absolutely, I think I always want the viewer to be reminded that this is paint. That ultimately we are looking at material that is volatile, that is solid, that ultimately, we've got pigment floating around in liquid, in oils, and regardless of how an illusionary space can be created, I still want the physicality of the paint in some way to be there. And there's always a little gesture of that somewhere in each painting. Whether it's a drip of paint, or some chemical response to oil and water in the materials, or just the physicality of just a little clump of paint there or something, because I don't want my work to ever be all complacency in any way, just this sort of expansive atmospheric space where you kind of get to not being accountable in some way...where you can't project your own longings, your own rationale into this, and I feel like I always want the paint to ultimately always be there. That there's still this very raw and very, and again for me, the language of alchemy helps me to communicate these things best. It's just that the painter...I still find it absurd that I still mush around paint every day and think that somehow there's something transformative in these materials, that it'll become greater than the sum of its parts. And you take that leap every time you start. Every time you get to a studio. But I do feel like there is, in the artist, and particularly with the painter, that you are expecting some kind of alchemic process where this tritus, this unformed matter of paint that's sort of charged with potentiality, that somehow that raw material is then going to be viewed with meaning somewhere. That it's going to transform, at some point when is it not paint, and then it becomes atmospheric and so...it's a strange thing to constantly be in that conversation with this material. And I guess, I always want to be still in some way, there's a gesture that means that this is paint, this is not. I want that kind of built-in paradox in the work too, where it's a surface that can be incredibly built up, but that there's something right there on the surface that gets in the way...like you don't always have full access to the illusionary space.

**Burgard:** And if someone perceives that blob on the paint a literally atmospheric, translucent, transparent type of field...again because of human nature, I think that they're inclined to follow that line of thought in matters of being transformed into spirit, and paint is being transformed into illusion, and light is being transformed into enlightenment, and so forth. And it does tend, I think, to pictorially, because of the frame of reference to other works, including religious paintings, including Rothko, whether transcendent or not, we tend to bring that frame of reference to your works as well. And

I'm very curious, because you've described painting as an act of devotion, but does it go so far as the surface only, and the interest in the cell chemical process, or how do you see that in viewing or not, in how other people either respond to it, or the way you think about it, so to speak, the content of the painting as opposed to how it's actually fabricated.

**Waterston:** I find myself more and more, just becoming so extraordinarily uninterested in my finished paintings. It's just...I don't find...that's a different kind of engagement that ultimately the viewer needs to claim in some way or have an experience that's entirely separate from the one that has gone through the process of making it a work, because...I never feel like I have an absolute pure experience with my own work, just the same as I feel when I look at somebody else's work. I get to have a whole other experience that has nothing to do with the attachment of the physicality of making it. And for me, in the making of these paintings, it is where I find this kind of...it's like a terrible beauty in some way. It's labor and it's hard and it's difficult, and yet that's where for me all of the parts that are really meaningful are happening in the actual process of painting. And then afterwards, I never feel like the work...I don't think this is a very odd thing to say, but I never really feel like the work really transmits what I had set out or what my intentions were. It always feels like it's a shadow of something that is far greater to me in the making of it. So there's always a slight bit of a let down, a little bit of melancholy around it. They bear a kind of heaviness to me after I'm done with them because I never feel like, "Oh, that actually marks that experience so perfectly." It never ends up that way. And so, and it's precisely I think that particular state that makes me want to return into the studio again. It's like, "I want to try again. Let me try it this way..." And so, I'm just finding more and more as I continue to work...I have to respect these objects to some degree, but I also feel very detached from them as well.

**Burgard:** So that is part of your experience as an artist, and then there's also the viewer's experience which is interesting because, there's the famous Jasper Johns quote that says "If you invent chewing gum and people use it as glue, well you have no control over it, it leaves your hands and it is what it is." You come with something else, and everyone else's eyes or hands or whatever else it might be. And you had talked about, this gets back a little bit to the willful imposition of the viewer's own perception, because many people would look at individual works, and we could all walk around and pick out our favorite thing and the one we'd want to take home, and we will say, and we often do say, "I just don't know what it was, that was just the one." Or we'll make up some excuse, "I love the color, I love the composition, or I love works on paper, it's the cheapest one, it's the most expensive one, it's the one Ken Baker talked about, it must be the most valuable..." and those are all really pretty flimsy excuses, we often can't articulate it. Either we don't have the vocabulary or we don't want to, we don't want to dissect it and spoil it and so forth. But everyone has that experience. And I know you've talked about how the act of perceiving and interpreting a work of art, from the viewer's point of view, is actually an abstraction in itself. And I thought that was a really interesting way to talk about it, that it is an abstraction, and that we are trying to see something in it that actually fulfills us in some way. And what also, talking about that act of abstraction, that we are of course rummaging through our image bank, and correlating it with other previous

images, or that Munch painting that we really wanted and just couldn't afford. And most painting that we wanted and couldn't afford that had a similar feeling or mood, or just a personal experience that we had either in life or nature or people or whatever it might be. But I thought that your description of it as an act of abstraction itself, the way that we perceive art, was very interesting.

**Waterston:** I think just the phenomenon of sight itself, and just that sensory perception of...which again is going back to this idea of what we trust as truth. And we really so often are all hardwired to believe...I feel like we say that what we see is absolutely true, and that the physiological phenomenon of sight is going to tell us that this indeed is a truth. And yet, our whole sight is so much informed by our own individual experiences, our own individual traumas or exultations or whatever it is...so, it's like...and that's constantly changing, and going back to our ability to take in all that is around us, and to take in a work of art is constantly shifting or it's corrupted by something, or all of the sudden we have a different insight than we had before...and so, that's why it's a kind of analytical process to try to deconstruct a work of art is...it's slippery. It kind of will work in that moment, and then you have to kind of try it again and again. And so, I'm interested in that as well. As I'm painting, there is a manner of process very much so as I'm working, and yet I'm working in this very kind of irrational space, and so I'm constantly having to just not always trust what I'm actually...you know, what's always in front of me. So, it's almost just kind of like painting with your eyes shut.

**Burgard:** It's interesting, almost by definition we think, or with our Western frame of reference we almost assume that art intrinsically, inherently is a projection onto a surface usually, could be a room installation like Stanford, of an idea or a vision, in every sense of the term. And It's sort of interesting because if you think back, which is always a dangerous thing, but when you go back through the history of art, you could argue in many cultures and many religions, which is where a lot of art historically and numerically has come from, that a lot is actually coming from envisioning the mind truly. And somewhere on, before, or after that shift to the projection onto the landscape as a separate environment or a separate identity on which human beings act, and get bigger and bigger and more aggrandized and take up more space and elbow room, and so forth, and commission those things because, they're in the picture, so to speak. It's sort of interesting because in that process and in that shift, then you get to modernism, where you talked about with the horizon line oscillating up and down, and that conception is still there, all the way back to the Renaissance window, literally the picture frame is a window, and is a projection, single point perspective, whatever it might be, and often with a landscape, populated or not, and it's sort of interesting because there is this assumption that the painting or the work of art becomes a projection of the artist's imagination, and even that the studio becomes a metaphor for the artist's brain and this interior life of the mind, and they then sort of create these extraordinary things out of their psyche or out of their intellect and project them into the world. There are some very famous examples of this, I mean, there are hundreds of studio paintings, Picasso in the 20<sup>th</sup> century very famously did lots of them. Diebenkorn, interestingly, in the ocean park paintings a lot of people would interpret looking at the early drawings living in the Ocean Park neighborhood of Santa Monica that he is looking at the framed Casement window,

and the view that's framed not unlike Matisse, his great hero, looking out at Notre Dame through the windows, becomes, so to speak, the frame of reference. But Diebenkorn interestingly makes the glass window the subject. The window itself is not a view onto something else, it is what's trapped in the permeable glasses and liquid, translucent transparent thing, and it's magical. It's right in there, it's not in the studio and it's not out there, he finds this really interesting mediating point. And I'm interested in your work, and some of it is quite explicit, we've got two of them right here, there's often an incredible sense of interior and exterior, now here you are convinced on some level, partly because of perspective and how we see things so to speak, that we think we sense and inside outside. And in other works, including other parts of the gallery here, there is this incredibly strong sense of imminent "insiderness" that you're already in it. So I'm wondering if you can talk about this issue of exterior vs. interior because in so many of your works, it's just so palpable that you're in it. You're not projecting like a Renaissance artist, it's something removed from you like the landscape from your experience, that you're actually inside the work in some very tangible sort of way.

**Waterston:** It started like, these two particular pieces really did start looking at early Renaissance painting, particularly the Oculus paintings of Mantegna and these artists who were trying to somehow create architectural layout of the heavens and the cosmos and they would actually construct these very wildly abstracted spaces within the depicted atmosphere and sky, whether it was on the ceiling or the wall. So I've always been interested in trying to comprehend closer to that aperture or pull back in it. To feel somewhat disoriented as to where you are standing or floating or, are you in it? Are you approaching, is the viewpoint back further? So, just as you're saying, I do like to play with this idea of being either inside the space or actually pulling away from it...and in the last couple of years, the work has set out to construct a much more disoriented view point, like you're not quite sure where you're physically supposed to be as you're looking into this illusionary space.

**Burgard:** I'm curious also, getting back to the issue of transparency, translucency, and arguably illusion, because I know you have many sources, artists that fascinate you by the use of light, certainly Renaissance, where light carries spiritual or other transformative associations, and I'm curious whether or not on some level, because many of your surfaces are so light filled and so sensitive, I mean their touch and their perception in their rendering, including very subtle gradations of color and so forth, it often seems to the viewer like they are truly membranes of a type. We tend to think of a canvas as a canvas or panel, it's a masonite panel, it has physical presence, and then we're amazed when William Michael Harnett paints the dead bunny and transforms it into some miraculous replication of nature or whatever it is, or a beautiful landscape that's recessive, convincing, so on and so forth. And it seems like light itself is clearly a huge and arguably one of the greatest forces or work in many of your works, and it also seems a sense of penetrability, and transparency, and sort of membrane-like feeling which I think makes the paintings on one hand seem vulnerable and I think, this may say more about me I don't know, this perception that the world is like that. It's permeable, it's sensitive, it's sensitized, it's fragile. When we really start thinking about it, we understand that our skin is permeable, that you can't draw a fixed line around the body or

this bottle or anything else, that glass is liquid albeit slow moving, that in old houses the window panes are bigger at the bottom and then you flip them over, and so forth. But we don't usually think about it, because we're so invested in thinking that this table will hold up this bottle and this chair will hold you. And we don't want to go there, and it seems like a lot of your works propel viewers to go there and think about that and how we and/or nature and part of nature and part of biology, obviously, might be permeable, and that there is no fixed line, all appearances to the contrary with square canvases or pieces of paper.

**Waterston:** Permeability is definitely an ongoing motif, if you will, in my work. And also just trying to represent both solids and fluids, and actually just the opacity of the paint and the way in which the paint is used. It's either worked with in very transparent and a very thinly applied way, or it's very opaque. Maybe the painting over here will illustrate that. The piece is called Ziggurat, and it's playing with these forms of the Ziggurat, which is an ancient architectural structure that is Babylonian, and many are found in Iran and Mesopotamia, and they were these temple structures that were solid, and they were not permeable, you could not enter into them in any way. And they were just these solid massive tiered, staired temples that were supposed to somehow, not in the way of the pyramid, I mean they operated in the way that a pyramid did, but again there was this solid form that to me was just so charged with this kind of...it was supposed to, just by being around it, give one access to ascension. You know, not unlike this painting as well, I mean that whole idea of ascension, that you still full bodily intact, that you could go to a, either a heavenly realm or a psychological realm still bodily intact. So this piece plays with that form of this solid and very impenetrable form, and then its kind of mutability and how it's shifting and unstable in some way. And so, the kind of visual instability is something that plays along with the permeability with things that I'm interested in. There are several pieces that play with that...how something looks. Where a kind of vocabulary is set up where this is sort of archetronic structure and stability, and then there are other elements against it that are much more volatile in some way.

**Burgard:** You've talked about Wabi-sabi and this idea of transience and sort of aesthetic and velocity of transience, including that it can be difficult. Nothing is perfect, nothing is finished, nothing is complete; so does that dovetail with your thinking about those ideas? I mean, you've all noticed looking at the works in the exhibition and elsewhere that many of them, especially in that corner there and around the corner, have very strong references to Japanese painting traditions, Chinese too, including right down to the sort of appearance as it were of silver gilt leaf being applied to the screen in the interstitial areas between the little squares of silver leaf foil applied to the screens, and they become more impaired over time as they disintegrate or oxidize. But the silhouette, positive and negative space, asymmetric perspective as opposed to Renaissance perspective, but that idea of transience that comes out of Buddhism is something that you've also talked about.

**Waterston:** Yes, and I'm finding that I'm using more art historical reference around Western painting and Western tradition right now that so much parallels my long engagement with Eastern philosophical underpinnings of my work, I'm finding as I've been doing research in the last few years around Christian motifs, particularly history of

Western art, that there are so many conceptual ideas around...you know I've been so interested in Eastern thought, that kind of play out in a much more mutated and kind of, if you will, kind of deformed way in Western art. It's kind of interesting because I've been working on the St. Francis Project for the last few years, and there have been so much of these concepts around how physical form ends up being this structure which can be this point of departure for an ecstatic state or a different perception or experience but it's also kind of the thing in which someone is weighted down by it, or limited by it in some way. So you know, I play with those ideas. And in the last couple of years, I've been looking a lot at again the sort of solid forms and breaking out of solid forms. So it's been an interesting cross over to observe.

**Burgard:** And I know you've talked about intentionally marring a surface a little bit apropos of...nothing being perfect and making sure that it's not...you know, like taking out a corner of the rug in the motif or whatever it is...but acknowledging it and seeing beauty in it, and also drawing attention to the physicality and arguably the spirituality. Darren has been working, as many of you know, on a very large series of paintings dealing with extensively St. Francis, and...by the way, if you have not seen it, you have to go see the Porziuncola, it is so...; it's just mind boggling, only in San Francisco. No only in The United States. It is the official national...I don't even know if you can have a national shrine of St. Francis, but anyway, the national shrine of St. Francis (there was an Eagle over the door and everything), no, that was a faithful obsessive replica of his shrine in Assisi. You have the little house building structure he lived in while he was alive, and then they built the huge cathedral, the huge Baroque cathedral over it and around it. And so, it is a, so to speak, a life size reliquary, an actual house that is now inside a church instead of having the little reliquaries that we're used to that are house-like in appearance, but are about this big. And it is the most extensive...they've replicated the texture, and the stallions from the same quarry, and the frescoes are exactly the same, and it's in the church at Columbus and Vallejo I think. You have to go see it. It's just astounding.

**Waterston:** It *is* astounding.

**Burgard:** And since we are in San Francisco, St. Francis's city, hence we get to have the national shrine. But anyway, it's quite extraordinary to think that Darren is tackling, in this post-modern age, a cycle of paintings, which is something that you'd expect from Renaissance Baroque artists and so forth, and says a lot about ambition maybe, or hubris, I don't know. But maybe just as much about simplicity and time and narrative. I have to say personally, I have to share this little bit: My favorite renaissance paintings are the little Predella panels that tell the story. Beautiful tempera paintings, often no bigger than a sheet of paper. And they just are coloristically, compositionally, metaphorically, symbolically, spiritually, take your pick, prosaically the most extraordinarily powerful and always in that with that tension between representation and abstraction. Spirituality, materiality often relinquishing one for the other in terms of St. Francis. The only other issue is sort of interior and exterior; Darren also, which is a very Renaissance thing to have done, actually went and watched an autopsy, which is probably not something anyone else in this room could claim to have done unless you're a forensic scientist. And I'm wondering if you could just talk about that a little bit, even when I first heard that,

even hearing that, immediately called forth images, probably unfortunately from television and movies. And if you really think about it, and you really think about either doing it yourself or think about what it would be like to be two feet away when the doctor or the scientist. The forensic scientist, cuts open the chest and takes out the organs, I believe they put the brain in a separate tray. I believe that this was someone who could have died that same day?

**Waterston:** Yes.

**Burgard:** Maybe if you could just talk about that, and especially how it relates to this issue of inside/outside, and this issue of without necessarily being either religious or scientific...one of the things you've talked about: art sort of mediating between science and magic and religion, and somewhere in the middle of that trinity, and that's one of the most amazing palpable things about it. Why did you arrange to do it, how did it feel to actually witness it, especially in terms of how did you expect it to be as compared to how it actually was, and then how did it affect your work?

**Waterston:** I was a little apprehensive leading up to it. I knew that I really wanted to do it, but I was nervous. I didn't know if I was going to be able to handle it or not. I had no idea what my response was going to be. And he was a young man who was 22-years-old, he had just died the night before in a car accident. He was not in any way injured; he had a few cuts and abrasions, but it was a head injury. So, his body was quite unmarked, and...he had a tattoo across his abdomen that said "precious life"...big, huge gothic letters across his stomach. And he...I mean it was just amazing. The accident had happened only hours before, and they had to do a full autopsy, which was really odd. And I didn't understand why he actually had to deconstruct his whole body to get the information that they had to. But for reasons around insurance and liability, they do this every time a body comes in. They actually have to document...they have to take a sample from every different part of the body and report it, I mean, really extensive. And so it just started. You know, before I could even decide whether or not I could acclimate to the situation, the autopsy began. And I found myself so kind of...I wasn't bothered by the bodily part of it. But I just still felt like...it felt like a slight intrusion, because I felt like how many people will ever actually see the interior of this person's body. There will only be three of us. And I was really in conflict about it, because there we were, this young person was alive only a few hours ago and then here we are, taking out his brain, opening up the whole interior cavity, pulling out all the organs, looking at everything, and it was just like, geez! It was a lot of information to take in. And I was right there, and you know, I was right over the body.

**Burgard:** You were implicit.

**Waterston:** Yes, I was implicit. I mean, it was like the doctor had handed me his heart so I could feel the weight of the heart...I mean, there was no turning back. I was right in there as all of this was playing out. And I was definitely in an altered state, but also just feeling the overwhelming...I mean, this is truly sublime, we've talked about sublime, I mean where something is...that state of where you are so transformed, yet it is like the

beautiful and the horrific all together. And you realize that there is so much information in this that will transform you forever in this process. And I was so aware of that at the time that this was happening. I was like, "I will never be the same again, I will never have the same experience with my own body the same way, another's body the same way," I mean, it just shifted everything. And there it was, the permeability, again, of this body and the way in which this body was so acutely designed to survive and sustain, and you could just see how all of these inter-workings were so extraordinarily...they were just tough and ready to do their job and, in particular in a young person's body. It was fortified with all of this life force still in it, and yet you saw just how incredibly fragile this whole infrastructure was and again, how this outside skin is holding together all of this mysterious solids and fluids again, being held my this membrane. And it was really extraordinary, and the autopsy was about almost 3 hours...2 and a half hours. And then my father picked me up afterwards. I met him at the IHOP that was like, down the street. I mean the guy let me out after it was all over it and I was like...And I was so together during this whole thing, I was like, "Okay, here we go, we're doing this whole thing, I'm going through it" and then when I got to the IHOP I lost it. And I was just sobbing. I was like eating pancakes sobbing. And then my dad came and got me and I was okay. It was fine, it was just...and it's kind of one of those things where I don't necessarily need to do it again, but I'm very grateful for the whole experience, but it's still very conflicting.

**Burgard:** Well you've talked about your use of pigments as being conceptually and maybe physically like bodily fluids. They often have a very aqueous appearance regardless, and it certainly a truism that most of the world is aqueous, although we don't see it that way, we see the built environment, but we know that isn't actually based on our own bodies. So, it's sort of interesting because that is our internal view. Our internal bodies, they are mostly aqueous. You've talked about, bodily fluids, pigments...these are life forces. These are life carrying, life embodying things.

**Waterston:** Absolutely. I found myself in the things I did before, *Splendid Grief*...the autopsy experience, which I hadn't thought about in a really long time actually, strangely enough, but I hadn't thought about it in a long time when I was working on those paintings for that exhibition, and thinking about ways in which to represent, again, the interior workings of the body, and the kind of celestial mappings and interior mappings and playing with...I mean, the experience of the autopsy really made me think about it again because I was trying to represent in these recent paintings, again, this sort of material and immaterial state of body, and sort of ethers and still trying to hold some of the systems of the body and fluids of the body and shapes of the body, because there is this whole cosmology within, and dealing with Leland Stanford Jr. and his untimely death, and all the things around his physical body that actually took place. With the family at that time, it really kind of brought back this young man from the autopsy...

**Burgard:** And I know most of you already know, since Cheryl showed the catalogue, that Darren's installation at Stanford addresses and engages installation work deals with Leland Stanford's death at 15 years old in Europe brought back to the U.S., funeral training all the way across the country, and you all know Stanford University really is truly a giant reliquary or shrine to Leland Stanford Jr. There are statues, commemorative,

and plaques all over the University campus, which you researched, went into the archives, pulled original objects, including the death mask...and so that's a good place to end just by asking...I know in my experience as an art historian, we talked about a kind of object that is a warning type of object, which is hair wreaths. They are often framed, and woven together, often with a deceased family member's hair so that the dead are entwined with the living, often in pseudo or overtly religious imagery, anchors for hope and all kinds of things. Often the person's name is written large or small as it were with these fibers of hair. And they're pretty creepy to modernize, they're sort of ethnographic almost. I did them once in an exhibition on art and ethnography, I used one from our basement because that's how most people respond. Not unlike most people in San Francisco or New York might respond to seeing something made out of hair from Papua New Guinea or from somewhere else. So it has this powerful effect. Just like, I mean we don't think about our fingernails anymore, but in some cultures people do, and this idea of something being severed from the body but still retaining associations with the body it came from and or something magical and specific about that person. Which is certainly how this family is: this is Leland's hair, specifically. It's not someone else's hair, it's Leland's hair. And then how we don't respond if it's not our own son or brother or father or mother's sister or whoever it might be. And I find those hair wreaths fascinating, because they are among the objects in American art or Folk Art or whatever you popular culture, that are the creepiest to the most people, just on their sort of instinctual response, which says a lot about how we think about human hair in a lot of ways. And, it's also sort of interesting that they were most prevalent in the Victorian era, which is the era when those statues all looked air brushed, which is sort of ironic about that, you know that women and so forth were all perfect and airbrushed.

**Waterston:** Have you seen the exhibition? When I walked in, it was so powerful to see all the hair, I don't know what it was it was just really...

**Burgard:** Exactly, you have a visceral response.

**Waterston:** And it was more even just the little hairs of stubble...for some reason, that was just the one thing that (\*cringe). It's like, I see it everyday in the sink, but there's something about seeing somebody else's hair on that...

**Burgard:** Well, just say something in closing about people's response, especially in this culture, to death or not, and how it's sanitized and what you've learned from that experience from doing that installation.

**Waterston:** As I was looking into the death of Leland Stanford Jr., I was really taken by the way in which the Victorians had embraced death and how they really...the living lived with the dead. There was a real fusion of that. And I realized how our culture is so removed...we've developed into a culture that's so. Certainly very youth based, and very much about aging and even death is...we fear it and it's very sort of kept away. When somebody's sick and dying, it's all about putting the actual...the moment of somebody's death is...it terrifies us and we keep it removed. And I think even around bereavement, there's a particular embarrassment and even shame sometimes around grief. And we

want to get over it fast, and make sure it doesn't happen where people can see that you're grieving. And you know, the Victorians mourned well, and they really knew how to do it. And they played it up and they honored that process. And even though there was a certainty of socioeconomic structure, which really put particular pressure on particular groups of people where, if you didn't mourn well, it was very disrespectful to the dead, and if you didn't actually have a sort of public display around your grieving, it was not really considered the right way to go about it, so looking at the bereavement of the Stanfords, which is this very formative family of the West Coast...and their own son died. It was just very extravagant and very operetic in nature, and even though there was so much in it that was perhaps excessive, I still really felt acutely, how profoundly different our own experience is with loss and the ways in which we deal with death, which is constant. And how separate we are from that. It was really an amazing experience to do that research, and again, the things that I've been interested in for much of my adult life and certainly as an artist, and so to have the opportunity to take a different and much more historic opportunity to research this in a very personal and intimate way around the loss of this young man was very powerful.

**Burgard:** Just in closing, I have a sense probably knowing Darren's history through his work. One of the reasons perhaps they seem so alive, is that the awareness of death is implicit in them. To know one is to know the other. And I think you're right, we all cut ourselves off from a deeper sense of life when you sanitize, remove, isolate, compartmentalize death, mourning, loss, etc. It takes something unique and powerful to unlock that and to sort of cut the bondage that ties these things up in equal packages. The Vietnam Memorial is a very famous example, I don't know anyone who can go to the Vietnam wall and not cry or just be horribly, terribly, beautifully moved by that. It's just not humanly possible, I don't think. The AIDS quilt would be another example in recent memory. I don't know anyone who didn't cry reading it, whether they knew the person on the quilt in front of them or not. It's a really good point, and it's an issue of, you know, you can't know one or understand one without the other.