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“There is nothing quite like a group of yellow flowers to give the illusion of
sunlight in a room”

David Turley and Andrew Renton in conversation, June 2026

David Turley: Anyway, I'm painting house plants. Based on a book I found in the street during lockdown 2020. I started then. A project to keep painting. At the same time I was doing these minimal landscape things on paper and canvas and also a series on LP record sleeves. I decided just as a way to start a new series, I'd do the whole book. It made sense to me with what was going on. Everyone was staying indoors and there was a nice connection to bringing nature inside. I became interested in the loaded histories of plants and how they spread around the globe. The pirate pillaging and world plundering explorations and botanist collections. I have a collection of houseplant books that I always draw from for collages and even titles. I named a black-and-white series, ink and collage on paper, "There is nothing quite like a group of yellow flowers to give the illusion of sunlight in a room." That title was something I wrote down years ago, which made sense. I thought I could name every work I ever made this.

Most projects for me begin like that. There needs to be some chance find or fragment of research which leads to a set of parameters that just establishes a way forward. It can be very arbitrary. A simple act out of necessity like my series of paintings on Stel's [my son's] food boxes. Just another surface when no paper available. But I get hooked on them. They have elements that open up new potential. But it just snowballs into every possible food box, exploring the card types/qualities then to the crappy LP covers, which became another big series of landscape type abstracts. Just a continual daily negotiation of surface and mark-making. I didn't see these plants as being any different really. Tonight I was working on this cactus.

Andrew Renton: What immediately comes to mind is that you're entering that infinite legacy of still life, but you're still operating at one remove. The still life — however elaborate — proposed a type of witnessing, even as the painter raced against time and what you were rendering wilted before your eyes. In this sense

the still life was never anything but a fiction, a construction, with symbolic order. But it did claim a space for the painter directly engaging with the object. Deeply subjective observation.

It definitely has something to do with nature. But it's an interrupted, perhaps even anxious version of it. On the one hand, there's a literal cut, detachment. Things are no longer growing. At the same time, paradoxically, there's an intensification of nature, a focusing, that makes the still life more real than real. The still life has this sense of the already mediated. Highly organised, always with the impression that you fell upon this scene by chance. It implies a reason for the mediation, but rarely explains itself. You can fossick for the codes and attempt to reconstruct a symbolic language. But you can't escape the simple truth that the still life with its detachment from nature plays tricks on your perception. Too much information. And not enough.

DT: I think the idea of 'at a remove' here is really important. In many ways, I don't see myself as a painter but rather find myself using painting and its histories/language. That remove makes this so far from the plant itself and life (still or otherwise). I don't see these operating as still life — despite appearing to. They are paintings of someone else's photography of plants. Of course they can't not be seen as still life, so they are immediately loaded. Is this a still life in the form of being a raw observation of someone else's work and as such they (the book's author/the photographer) become subject too? Their time, practice, legacy is part of the story.

It is not uncommon to make paintings from photographs, from source material, from still life scenes. But here the act of making a painting from each photograph in the A-Z is more about the whole painting of a book, or painting someone else's engagement with a project and its parameters. It's someone else's decisions/framing/interest. I'm not exactly a gardener or

houseplant lover. I find histories and connecting stories interesting. The exchange of ideas and experience through art.

They are individual paintings but they can't help but operate together as a whole. They accumulate. They are the result of the book's own parameters (editing what was and what wasn't included) as much as they are a result of painting each plant/photo faithfully. I may never paint a plant again after this. I am not a plant painter; it's not what I do. However, everything that comes with making a painting is here. My versions move elsewhere and are informed by my decisions to edit, to reshape. They are material translations as another act of moving through an art practice and being and considering all that comes with it and from it. There are so many layers here but inevitably what is seen, the end result, is a bunch of paintings of plants. Hopefully they can contain something more. For me it's never just about a good or bad painting. It's about the information/narrative/history and the intention that comes with it that is carried forward.

AR: Of course, you're right, at source they're not still lifes, as such. But your paintings inherit a formalism, mostly unconscious, but nevertheless still deliberate in the way they're put together. Is it artfully done? That's probably not the right word for it, but there are always decisions at work. Even if these can't be articulated. Perhaps they start from the premise that you can't really go wrong with your composition, and that the apparent randomness helps loosen up those decisions. Hit and miss, by definition. But I'd guess, statistically, because of the nature of the materials, more hit than miss. Maybe that's why it's a natural, intuitive act for most of us. Bunch of flowers, gathered randomly. Agents of colour, form, space. But you don't think about that; you just pull them together. But... what you're doing with these images (and they are already imaged, doubly formalised, an image of an image of a form) is responding to an always already given. It's

reproduction only in the barest sense of the word. The found image, with its foundness so central, is the starting point for making, rather than reproducing. That is, the doing of it is more a driver than what is done. That's not to underestimate what these paintings achieve. The opposite. But rather, I think the process for me has a cumulative, almost ethical value. Certainly a work ethic! But actually something more. I love those artists for whom painting is about the mundane daily process, testing a persistently niche corner of their practice. Kawara, Opalka, Dreher, even Ryman. Fewer and fewer parameters, so that the subject matter is no longer what's in front of you... And with those limitations something much more profound seems to take place – at the level of the paint itself...

DT: There is definitely something in me more like the painters you mention. The passing and marking of time, existence. Dreher's subject repeated and repeated but every time new. A single subject as a place to start and document his life. The subject is the same but conditions including light/reflection/materiality, etc. are never the same. And of course time. The impossibility of making the same painting. It can never be the same painting. Ryman – time through repeated material struggle. How can it be stripped right back but be so subtly different or even dramatically different? Thinking about Opalka, I remember doing a drawing project in relation to that forest project years back. The guy whose diary I found planted 10,162 trees. I did a series of pencil on paper works – 10,162 marks on each piece of paper. I'll have to show you one day.

Again some strange parameter set for me to work. To keep moving. Kawara I was into for years. I did so many time-based daily works for years. Photographing my portrait, so many collage works from rubbish collected that the wind had blown into my front yard for a year, collecting all the share house telephone messages, collecting handwritten shopping lists

left behind in shopping trolleys. Anyway... In my work there is something to do with cyclical returns. Linking things through me. Like that series I mentioned. The diary. How I remade/reprinted the diary, but including the diary entries, with the same press. How I made the gallery seats from a tree he planted, etc. I'm not sure here what's happening yet. I want to finish this series and reprint the book with my paintings in the same layout/format. But it's never about an ending, a finished painting. Maybe I never see a painting as finished, rather a living vibrating thing. Still holding energy, life and time and that of those that have spent time with it. There's some kind of hope there. An infinite.

AR: I love the idea of you remaking the book. Because of course it throws up the impossibility of remaking. There's no repetition, even when you try your hardest. And you're not trying to do that at all! As much as I look at this as a ritualised, conceptual project that enables continuity, takes the struggle for a subject off the table, we can't get away from the fact that what we have here is a series of paintings, with all their subjectivity and quirks and accidents. Indeed, in contrast to the painters we've been talking about, there is, despite everything, a material painterliness at work. I'm wary of raising the spectre of expressiveness, but you can't avoid the fact that paint is at work here, and it's behaving and misbehaving as you would have expected/hoped. One of the things that I think you are extremely successful at achieving is not overburdening the painting with the meaning of your gestures. It's not anti-expressive, as such, it's just that it's not the priority. Often in your painting there's a discontinuity of gesture. As if you are trying to keep each move as distinct as possible to avoid an overly unified image or stylisation. And despite this, sometimes I'll read it as a landscape. Perhaps we're all working under the burden of art history and it's inevitable that we read by making associations. Similarly, these flowers are often complete (abandoned?) just as the image is about to collapse. And there's

not much you can do about this. And perhaps, indeed, that's not something to worry about...

DT: That mention of collapse is actually in my mind always when painting, especially in the many years of abstract series on paper – how close it goes to the edge. The edge being a kind of understandable or believable but undefinable space. I would also never throw a work away or give up on it unless the paper gave up first. A physical collapse. That's the only way it wouldn't live on. That's why I have far too much expensive square footage of London real estate taken up with boxes upon boxes of works on paper. I'd love to put a show together with all the in-between paintings where my gestures shift. Where something new happens. Always my favourite works. Then there are hundreds before I find something new and it shifts again. The discontinuity of gesture is something that I'm very aware of within my painting. It is something I pursue.

It's hard talking about these plant paintings because I do have such a connection to abstract work. It's a big leap for me to be showing these figurative works. But they operate in the same way as my abstracts. There needs to be enough information for it to work as a space you can enter. I see them as spaces. Terrains to navigate. You mention landscape. My abstracts very much read as landscape for sure. I've always seen them as spaces to move through. In these plant paintings, the plants are there as images, as subjects, but the paint still confuses you and pushes you in and out of the image and material. Just painting, I suppose. I try to make something that isn't easy to understand too quickly. Something that shifts and moves with time. I approach each painting differently. I think I can't not do that, I come from another place as an artist. I am not a painter. I'm a maker of stuff, and I don't feel I have the ability, material/technical knowledge, etc. to approach painting with a style or defined technique. Every work is a new battle where everything starts again.