HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Beer with a Painter: Glenn Goldberg

By Jennifer Samet, July 2013

Glenn Goldberg, "Other Place 6" (2013), acrylic and ink on canvas, 16 x 12 in / 40.6 x 30.5 cm

I met Glenn Goldberg in 2005 when I was curating an exhibition about the history of the New York Studio School. Goldberg's tools-in-trade are elemental: dots, patterns, and symbolic, iconic representations of birds, trees, flowers. They couldn't be more different from the traditions of the Studio School and Queens College, where he studied in the late 1970s, and where the predominant way of working involved a heroic wrestling with form. Also, the athletic and Bronx-raised Goldberg doesn't necessarily look or sound like someone we expect to be making the paintings he does. When I recently visited him in his East Williamsburg studio, there were a dozen log-cabin model kits he had assembled and painted. Goldberg's voice, and personality, has that rootedness — he likes the hobbyist nature of tinkering with objects — but his work, and ideas, are ethereal. His painting is about this meeting point of the ordinary and the other, regularity and refinement. Repetitive mark-making becomes a focused, meditative practice, and a basic indexical sign is transformed into a richly charged visual field.

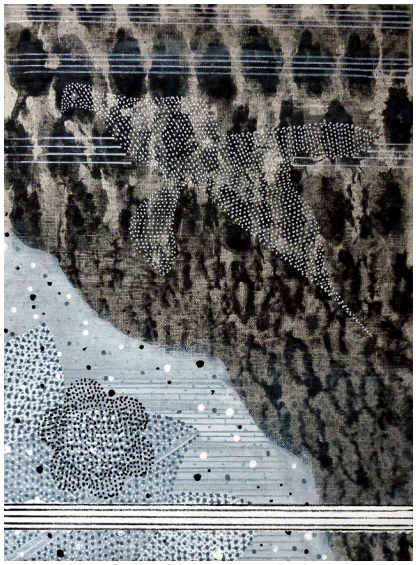
Jennifer Samet: You have spoken about sports and athletics as a metaphor for art making, and some of the common values in these practices. Can you talk more about this?

Glenn Goldberg: I grew up in the Bronx, and was a student-athlete type of kid. I wasn't raised in a particularly cultural setting, but I gradually shifted into different kinds of creative zones, other than sports. I started to realize, basketball isn't really about basketball. It is a vehicle for deeper understandings, whether it's discipline or persistence or an ability to work with others, an ability to deal with defeat. How people handle all sorts of disappointments and surprises — I think art has the same flow. The best athletes are very instinctual. They study the game, but they don't let their study limit their way of using

it. In all sports you find certain people that seem odd: the way they move, the way they think, or how they carry themselves is so compelling. If athletes are "other than," but have the ability to trust themselves, and stay involved, they can do amazing things. I'm interested in people persevering and prevailing, the people who manage to do it against the odds. It becomes devotional, not just mechanical. No matter how good you are, confidence is still a vulnerable thing.

JS: You use the word "devotional," which you have also used in reference to painting: seeing it ideally as an offering from which the maker effaces the self. Can you talk more about this?

GG: That is one of the greatest things in life: to be devoted to someone or something. At a certain point, I realized that, for myself, art really isn't about self-expression, or explaining myself, although it is impossible to avoid that. And it really, ideally, doesn't reflect on me. The best situation is when someone can look at a painting, but it is not important who made it. What's important is that that painting exists. I want to get out of the way. My paintings are really not about me. I don't know what one could tell about me if they look at these paintings, other than generalities. It is not about my story or my life; hopefully it's about something bigger than that.



Glenn Goldberg, "Other Place 19" (2013), acrylic, gesso, and ink on canvas, 16 x 12 in / 40.6 x 30.5 cm

JS: You left school to travel, but then you ended up back at Queens College and the New York Studio School. Who were your important teachers?

GG: The people I worked most closely with, and who were most inspiring to me, were Gretna Campbell and Ruth Miller. The two of them were great, solid women; they were givers. Ruth was just always on my side. And I remember Gretna said something beautifully challenging to me. She said, "You're painting well, but now maybe you have to start thinking about making a work of art." I had no idea what she was talking about. It took me years to figure out.

JS: What do you think she was saying?

GG: That you've got to have an idea, have the courage to find your own way, and that a work of art must have both an idea and a sense of completion about it. She was giving me a level to aspire to.

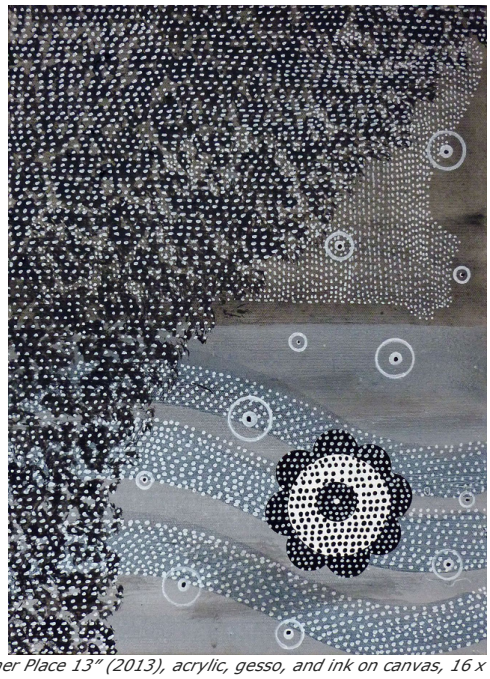
Glenn Goldberg, "Other Place 22" (2013), acrylic, gesso, and ink on canvas, 16 x 12 in / 40.6 x 30.5 cm

JS: How would you describe the process of coming into work that was your own?

GG: In Williamsburg, after I got out of school, I became interested in aspects of what was happening in the 1970s, from Robert Ryman, to Richard Tuttle, to Fred Sandback. I liked the poetic aspect, the idea of wiping the slate clean, not assuming I was there to fill up a rectangle with shapes and colors. I was interested in how a line can acquire reference and meaning. So if you start with a straight line, and curl it up towards the top, it can become like an umbrella or a candy cane. I started to make paintings from that semantic point of view, rather than abstract or representational. They were hybrids of drawing and image making, with a starting-from-scratch idea. The acceptance of hybrids has always been big to me, and not having assumptions about what a painting would look like. A lot of my training got undone, and I realized something had changed. I felt excited and unsafe, and that was the beginning of the way of thinking I've tried to adopt ever since.

JS: Your use of dots has been considered in terms of its relationship to pointillism, mechanical image production, and Aboriginal art. How would you address this question: what are the dots about for you?

GG: I spent years painting in somewhat of a lion tamer fashion, like I was in a boxing ring. I'd go into the studio, paint for hours on many different paintings, and they'd all change radically every day. This went on for many years. It was both a great way to learn and it was also exhausting. Gradually I got to the point where I needed to slow down. The challenge became how I could be deliberate, but not cautious. The dots afford me a way to measure: to show what was put into the paintings physically. It is fulfilling for me. My wife was a weaver. It is fulfilling to see someone put that much into something. Embroidery has it, weaving has it, some painting has it. It is all very visible how it got made. More importantly, you can see every touch. The dots also give an electricity, an energy; I can use them to create explosions, or create light. When I'm able to do it well, I find it exciting to see electricity come out of a pile of white stuff and water and a pile of black stuff and water. What I am attempting to do with the dots is more important than how they are affiliated with other dot people.



Glenn Goldberg, "Other Place 13" (2013), acrylic, gesso, and ink on canvas, 16 x 12 in/ 40.6 x 30.5 cm

JS: Yes. Aboriginal art and Tibetan sand mandalas are often cited in reference to your work. Are you in fact interested in these traditions?

GG: Those things are interesting to me, but that kind of commentary is usually quick and thin. It's almost like, "Have you seen Aboriginal works? They use dots also." And I politely say, "Yes, I have seen Aboriginal works." That's pretty much where it goes. Or people say, "Yeah, I might have seen some of your work — you paint mandalas!" And rather than say, "No, these aren't mandalas at all. Mandalas are very strict in their organization and what they're meant to do," I politely say, "Yeah, that's me." I'm very interested in those works, but I don't feel a stronger connection to those than I do to Shaker furniture or celadon bowls or Japanese screens, or a whole host of other things: rugs, African textiles, tiles. For me they are all whirling around. All those things excite me. So yes, they excite me, but not because they are dots. Not because I feel like I'm part of a dot family. It is well-intended, though. It is a desire to make a connection. But no one ever says, "Hey, are you interested in Damien Hirst?"

JS: Ha. Are you interested in Hirst?

GG: Not particularly. Maybe as a social phenomenon. Like there's a person who lives this way and does these things: that, I find interesting.

JS: They don't bring up Chuck Close either.

GG: No. They wouldn't. I accept what he does, but I don't feel a strong affiliation. I do very much like a few of those early black-and-white self-portraits.

JS: How have these characters in your paintings developed?

GG: They are selected — the icon of a duck, or a man walking.

JS: What do you mean by "selected"?

GG: I found a generic duck and then I implemented it as one of my team, in a way. I've used a man, a dog, a duck, a rabbit.

It is not a depicted rabbit; it is a generic, simplistic shape that we understand as a rabbit. It is a sign, and somehow, just a player. I need to vary my players; I don't want them to always be human beings. Like the bird, which I used extensively: it's really a stand-in for us. These attempt to talk about, from my point of view, what goes on. The way things are. So for a guy to be cruising through some sort of weird world, the rabbit looking out at the abyss, or the dream of getting to a place: that is sort of the way it feels. We can cope with it, hopefully; sometimes not. Years ago I used to think I could paint something sublime. I don't think my paintings are really about festivity and how wonderful life is. Incorporated in them is also some aspect of the melancholy and the difficult.

JS: How do you make these paintings: how long do you work on them, and how do the images come about?

GG: They are labor intensive, they happen one move at a time, and they accumulate. They ask for certain moves. A painting might be too graphic, and I need to make it more substantial spatially. Or I'll have had enough with the characters, and decide I need to just paint a landscape. Inhabited spaces / uninhabited spaces, color paintings / black and white paintings, big paintings / small paintings. If the painting is not feeling very alive, I might need to do something bold or aggressive, even though the whole timbre of my work is not very aggressive. If I have too much control, I'll do something like flick the brush, so it is perfect like nature, so that I'm out of the way. They both need the will, and they need the will to be thwarted. I've been inspired by the physicist Richard Feynman. He said that to be a great scientist, you need to know that no matter how many times you've done an experiment and gotten the same results, the next time you do it, you can't assume that you're going to get the same results. I think that the best artists are constantly conducting experiments. You're always turning the wheel because you want to see it in a different form or in a different way. I had an old brush, and it was open in the middle, so it made a beautiful mark. That's how a certain kind of skin happened. I'll do that for a while, and then I won't do it any more. A lot of it is real simple stuff. I'll see a gentle sky, and put something in it, and see another gentle sky, and put something different in it. It's a constant desire to keep things fresh and alive, and also head towards completion. That's always been the goal — like a verb, an action scene, not stasis. I believe Mondrian and Reinhardt painted action scenes. But you could never prove it. The greatest things in life are unprovable.